



**ON THE HUNT WITH
PAT SPAIN**

How Charles Fort's
great nephew became
TV's cryptozoologist

A MODERN WITCH HUNT BRITAIN'S SATANIC PANIC
MILLENNIUM TALES WEIRD NEWS OF THE NOUGHTIES
POLTERGEIST PLAGUE CASES OF CONTAGION

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Pat Spain is a TV presenter, writer, explorer and cryptozoologist – and the great nephew of Charles Fort. **ETIENNE GILFILLAN** tracked him down and spoke to him about his extraordinary career, cryptozoological passions, family history and the power of synchronicity.

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COVER ILLUSTRATION
ETIENNE GILFILLAN
EARTH, BIGFOOT, FROG
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EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS



IT WAS 50 YEARS AGO TODAY...

This issue marks another major milestone in the storied history of *Fortean Times*: exactly 50 years since the appearance of the very first issue of *The News* (as *FT* was known for its first 15 issues) in November 1973. We're certainly delighted – and, we must say, rather surprised – to have come this far: 438 issues over half a century, and a gradual evolution from an occasional photocopied newsletter to a 'proper' newsstand magazine that appears every four weeks.

So, we look both backwards and forwards in this issue, remembering some past highlights and speculating about what the future holds. One obvious question, of course, concerns the current state of strange phenomena: has science solved the mysteries that exercised us in 1973? Has the world been disenchanted? Is there now less space for the weird? In this issue's Science column (p.14) David Hambling offers a brief survey of the field, noting that while such old favourites as the Bermuda Triangle and Erich von Däniken's alien astronauts might have been debunked, the boundaries of the truly mysterious have not just been rolled back by new scientific knowledge, but also transformed by it: as we learn more about both the ancient past and distant galaxies, new mysteries and surprises are revealed. Simon Young (p.27) isn't so sure that the classic cases of forteana have necessarily yielded up their secrets in the face of better data; and he wonders what irrational oddities will roam the forean world 50 years from now when we've handed our rational and creative powers to AI and given up on free speech.

Meanwhile, veteran ufologist Nigel Watson (p.28) looks back over 50 years of the UFO mystery – a subject of forteana study that, despite the rise of

the psychosocial hypothesis and any number of sceptical takes, continues to morph, mutate and fascinate – and how *FT* has both reported on it and shaped responses to it over the years. Paul Sieveking (p.42) goes back to the Noughties with his personal selection of news stories from the first five years of the New Millennium (you know: talking fish, boulders up trees, boy turns into yam). And, to celebrate our half century of studying an ever-changing world of weirdness, we're launching a year-long series republishing long-out-of-print articles from the archives, beginning with one of the most important stories we ever published: Mike Dash's analysis of the Satanic ritual abuse panic that, starting in the US, gripped Britain in 1989 and 1990. It's a case whose implications remain as relevant as ever in our very different age where witch hunts and trials by social media have become a worrying norm; next issue we'll be reprinting Bob Rickard's classic contextualisation of the whole troubling business.

We're also extremely happy to have had the chance to chat with zoologist, explorer and TV presenter Pat Spain; it seems entirely appropriate that the man who became National Geographic's *Beast Hunter* – searching for some of the world's most mystifying cryptids – is the great nephew of none other than Charles Fort. Etienne Gilfillan spoke to him (p.30) about his fascinating career – which was clearly meant to be – family history and hopes of helping inspire the next generation of fortean minds.

This month's letters pages (p.63) also celebrate our anniversary, with readers telling us how they discovered *FT* and the ways in which it has influenced their thinking over the years: thanks to all of you who wrote in to share your memories!



HERE IS THE NEWS

If the past is another country, what exactly was in the first issue of *The News*, subtitled “A Miscellany of Fortean Curiosities”, and how does it differ from what you’d find in an issue of *FT* today? The very first

section covered ‘Aerial Curiosities’, and we’re struck by the fact that the stories of a kestrel attacking schoolchildren and of a golden eagle carrying off a fox that continued to fight back (both plummeted to their deaths) finds a contemporary analogue in the story of Peggy Jones’s injuries when a snake wrapped itself round her arm and was then attacked by a hawk (p.6 of this issue). ‘Animal Curiosities’ – the reappearance of wolves in Austria, cows vs helicopter, escaped hippo – remain a perennial presence in today’s *FT*, as do accounts of strange deaths (gamekeepers’ shotgun duel ends in double fatality), mysterious appearances and disappearances (complete set of clothes and false teeth found in a cemetery), rains of frogs (Sutton) and toads (Toulon), ghosts (dead landlord revisits pub), hoaxes (Atlantis discovered) and meteorites (Tunguska). There’s also a story about research into mind-reading cats, human oddities aplenty (a woman who hasn’t slept in 30 years), wolf children in Italy and Ceylon and cases of ‘mass hysteria’: as ever, these outbreaks of mass psychogenic illness tended to be focused on schools. There were also news reports concerning musical stars of the day: Long John Baldry’s cat supposedly being killed in an occult ritual performed in Highgate cemetery by occultist David Farrant; and the arrest of rock manager Philip Clarke Kaufman for snatching the body of Gram Parsons from Los Angeles airport and driving it to the desert to set it on fire.

Judging from this snapshot of weirdness circa 1973, the past isn’t so much of a foreign country after all; and as Bob Rickard noted at the time: “The corollary of fortean studies seems, inescapably, the formidable chronicles of human foolishness in all its wide variety”. Some things never change.

FORTEAN TREASURES AT AUCTION

FT readers may not be regular visitors to the Bonhams clock sale, but at this month’s event the auction house is offering for sale some items of considerable fortean interest.

Lt. Cdr. Rupert Thomas Gould (1890-1948; see **FT315:50-52** for a summary of his career and influence) was an eccentric British polymath, BBC *Brains Trust* regular and authority on maritime chronometers (among other subjects) who also wrote



a number of early fortean books in the 1920s and 1930s. A collection of Gould ephemera gathered by Johnathan Betts while writing his definitive Gould biography *Time Restored* (OUP, 2006) goes under the hammer on 29 November and includes Gould’s own annotated copies of his two books of forteana, *Oddities: A Book of Unexplained Facts* (1927) and *Enigmas: Another Book of Unexplained Facts* (1929), and his seminal cryptozoological studies *The Case for the Sea Serpent* (1930) and *The Loch Ness Monster and Others* (1934), the very first book on the world’s favourite lake monster. If you fancy owning something from the library of the man who has been described as ‘Britain’s answer to Charles Fort’, then the auction starts at 2pm on 29 November at Bonhams, New Bond Street, London (bonhams.com).

A BIG THANK YOU

FT’s editors past and present would like to pay tribute to our many and much valued readers (some of whom have been with us from the beginning); to our amazing news clipsters whose regular mailings (and now emailings) from around the world have been our life-blood; to our regular columnists and countless contributors, whose peerless research and writing have helped make *FT* the world’s foremost journal of strange phenomena; and to the many people – news and reviews editors, designers, subs, staff writers, picture researchers, illustrators and cartoonists – who have worked on the magazine during its long history. Our thanks to you all!

AND FINALLY: A WORD FROM OUR FOUNDER

“On the happy occasion of *FT*’s fiftieth birthday, my deepest love and gratitude goes to my wife Sam, without whose selfless support (often working nights to supplement family income and bearing the brunt of care for our children) in those early pre-John Brown Publishing days, none of us would be enjoying the unique achievement that is *FT* today.” – Bob Rickard

Sam
DAVID R. SUTTON

Bob Rickard
BOB RICKARD

Paul Sievering
PAUL SIEVERING

WHAT PEOPLE SAY ABOUT FORTEAN TIMES

“The one magazine I never fail to read from start to finish: unfailingly stimulating, eye-opening and above all wildly fun.”
TOM HOLLAND, HISTORIAN AND WRITER

“No magazine has been so committed, for so long, to the notion that the world is not only stranger than we know, but stranger than we can know... I find it a hugely reassuring magazine, not just because of the humour and the absurdity, but because it knows when to drop the jokes and become deadly serious.”
CLIVE BARKER, WRITER

“A continual and amusing reminder of the strangeness of the world.”
RUPERT SHELDRAKE, BIOLOGIST AND AUTHOR

“Every issue of *FT* is like Christmas!”
GUILLERMO DEL TORO, FILM-MAKER

“I discovered *FT* in its earliest incarnation, and watched, sometimes proudly, sometimes bemusedly, as it grew from being a little black and white collection of clippings of the odd into the foremost... whatever it is today. Full-colour, well-researched, gullible-sceptical-glorious assemblage of the facts and otherwise that Charles Fort described as the damned.”
NEIL GAIMAN, AUTHOR

“I read the *Fortean Times* because it’s a catalyst, not a portal.”
RAT SCABIES, MUSICIAN

“I consider myself a Fortean, and *FT* really is my favorite magazine.”
WILLIAM GIBSON, NOVELIST

“A veritable national institution, *Fortean Times* is a treasure trove of the unusual and unexplained, and I look forward to every issue. What’s more it catalogues these things without the necessity of an overriding theorem, content to let its contents stand as a record of human contradictions, bafflement, wonder and silliness, delivered with a healthy tongue in its cheek and a scepticism balanced with an openness that’s refreshing and unique.”
STEPHEN VOLK, WRITER

“I really need *Fortean Times*. It’s almost a comfort read for me, a monthly reassurance that the world is way stranger than most people think... and that I’m never going to run out of plots.”
PHIL RICKMAN, NOVELIST

“One of the greatest magazines in the world... there really is nothing else quite like it.”
ALISTAIR GRANT, POLITICAL EDITOR, THE SCOTSMAN

“My *FT* travels with me around the world. I read it from cover to cover and I love it.”
URI GELLER, PSYCHIC AND ENTERTAINER

“The only magazine for news on aliens, ghosts and hairy kids.”
KARL PILKINGTON, COMEDIAN

“When I discovered *FT* it was nothing short of a revelation, and that sense of mind-expanding, heart-swelling joy has only increased with every single issue.”
PAUL GIAMATTI, ACTOR



A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

PENIS SNATCHING PANIC | Supposedly missing members lead to lynchings in Nigeria



LEFT: A suspected penis thief caught in Abuja. BELOW: Another suspect being lynched by a mob.

Since the beginning of September, claims of penis theft have been spreading rapidly through Nigeria, starting in Calabar in the southeast of the country. Such panics, where men believe their genitals have been magically stolen, often when they shake hands with someone, have a long history in Africa. They have also occurred in Singapore and other parts of Asia, where they are known as “shook yang” or Koro, and similar allegations turn up in European witchcraft cases going back to the mediæval period.

According to someone named Chibuike, described as a “spare parts dealer” by local newspaper *The Vanguard*, penis theft is on the increase in Nigeria because “an organ was said to be sold for six hundred-thousand-naira (£630) last week, but owing to market forces and high demand the price has gone up to one million (£1,050) per organ”. He added that “the organs are used for ritual purposes to make money and

anyone whose genital is stolen would die a few days after. More people will fall victim if something drastic is not done by the authorities to stop the ugly state of events in the city.” Blessing Ngi, a resident of Calabar South, is reported as saying, “It happened in my area this morning. Someone lost his penis, and it took severe beating of the snatcher before he returned the organ,” adding that, “People now put bitter kola in their pockets or hold their private organs tightly while walking on the street or inside commercial vehicles. The price of bitter kola has gone up because of the high demand.” Alligator peppers were also claimed to protect against penis theft. Local police stepped in to calm the situation after an angry mob had gathered to lynch two youths

Alligator peppers were also said to protect against penis theft

when a man claimed he had felt his penis disappear as he shook hands with them. According to a witness, he immediately raised an alarm, then removed

his trousers: “What he saw was smaller than a grain of rice and there were no testicles too”. Police spokesperson Irene Ugbo said: “Have you seen anyone whose private

part was stolen? Bring him here for medical examination. People should discountenance the rumours and go about their normal businesses.”

The panic, however, swiftly spread; first to nearby Akim,

where a naval officer staffing a checkpoint claimed he lost his genitals to a man named Samuel. “When he got to the sentry point, he was asked whom he was looking for and his mission in the barracks, but while he was talking with the sentry officer, the officer felt an electric jolt around his genitals and behold, when he touched the area, his private had gone,” claimed a *Vanguard* article, which took the claims at face value. According to the paper, Samuel was then beaten up and told to return the missing genitals, but “did not say if he was going to return the missing organ and did not deny being responsible for the disappearance of the genital”. ‘Penis thefts’ were then reported in the inland city of Lokoja, where a boy selling doughnuts was said to have had his manhood taken by a man who bought doughnuts from him, while a passenger on public transport cried out that his penis had vanished after he was touched by a fellow passenger, resulting in the suspect being seriously beaten. There were also reports of a man being burned to death in the city after being accused of stealing someone’s genitals. This drew condemnation from politician Omoyele Sowore, who said: “The trick is accuse someone of stealing another person’s manhood – an impossibility – and before anything is said the wrongly accused person is coined to death or burnt alive.”

After several weeks of mounting agitation, police





UNDEAD ARCHÆOLOGY

Vampire child
unearthed in
Poland

PAGE 12



NO ANCIENT ALIENS

Science solves
Seventies
mysteries

PAGE 14



PASCAGOULA INCIDENT

Calvin Parker's
abduction
experience

PAGE 26



ABOVE: This middle-aged man suspected of being a "manhood thief" was caught and badly beaten in Lokoja, Kogi state.
BELOW: TikTok videos showing supposed penis snatchers, such as this young man in Calabar, have been circulating.

started to take action against the complainants, with police in Calabar taking Moses Edet Udo to a police clinic for investigation after he alleged a man named Atim Inyang Jackson had stolen his genitals. Officers said that "after thorough investigation, it was confirmed that the complainant's manhood was intact," and they warned that "false rumours" would damage the region's tourism industry. They later went on to charge Kufre Edet Daniel, 30, with felony and other charges for claiming his genitals had been stolen. In Lokoja, police also arrested Isiaka Abdulsamad after he claimed that a staff member of Kogi State Polytechnic stole his genitals while he sat an exam there. "In the course of the examination, he beckoned on one of the invigilators who is a staff member of Kogi State Polytechnic to put him through the log-in details for the examination," police reported.



"He however came back to the hall after he was through with the examination and raised a false alarm that his manhood was missing, accusing the invigilator who earlier assisted him of being responsible." After examining Abdulsamad to prove his genitals were fine, police said that "he fabricated the story in an attempt to gain attention on trending delicate stories of manhood theft". However, this did not stem the panic; it soon spread to Gwagwalada, where Emmanuel Ofodili claimed

his 22-year-old son's manhood was stolen by someone in their neighbourhood who had touched him on the head, adding that the penis was there but smaller than its original size. By the end of the month, people were also reporting breast theft. Fatima Abdullahi, a public servant, claimed that she witnessed a businesswoman selling grains in Gwagwalada Market and alleging that a man who bumped into her caused both her breasts to disappear, after which he ran away, evading capture. The panic shows no sign of abating. *vanguardngr.com*, 8+11+16+18+25 Sept; *thecable.ng*, 12 Sept; *crossriverwatch.com*, 19 Sept *saharahreporters.com*, 21 Sept 2023.

For coverage of previous penis snatching panics, see FT56:33, 82:30, 87:45, 93:10, 99:12, 103:12, 104:53, 105:20, 126:50, 126:66, 148:23, 156:10, 179:27, 211:16, 213:73, 217:73, 238:15, 240:74, 273:10-11, 303:25, 323:24, 366:8-9, 367:21, 376:8-9.

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES
FROM AROUND THE WORLD

POLICE SAY A WOMAN SHOT DEAD HAS DIED

ABC News (Australia), 15 July
2023.

Ottawa: Vexatious litigant accused of leaving dead ferret in man's freezer

CBC News, 25 Aug 2023.

COUNCIL ACCUSES MAN OF STEALING HIS OWN GARDEN

Metro, 29 June 2023.

Boscawen: 'Safest' village in UK but wayward youths are rebellious with lard

D.Telegraph, 9 May 2023.

EDUCATION MINISTER GRILLED ON FAULTY CONCRETE

GB News, 1 Sept 2023.



SIDELINES

PHANTOM KNOCKER

Four residents at the Chelmsford Court sheltered housing complex in Worcestershire have been plagued for 15 years by someone who knocks on their doors, then runs away, sometimes up to four times a day. They have urged the owners to install CCTV to try and end the nuisance and police are now investigating. "If it was a silly kid I could understand," said one resident, "but they must be an adult now. I just wish I could catch the bugger to teach them about respect." *Sun*, 23 Feb 2023.

SPOOKY

Archaeologist Mensun Bound and his team discovered the well-preserved wreck of Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton's ship *Endurance* 3,000m under water on 5 March 2022; 100 years to the day after Shackleton was buried in Grytviken, South Georgia. The coincidence later turned out to be even closer when an account from a pallbearer at Shackleton's funeral was discovered: the explorer had been laid to rest at between five and ten past four, while Bound's team had found the wreck at five past four. *D.Mail*, 27 Jun 2023.

SMILE!

The Smile Facial Muscle Association in Japan has seen a huge increase in business after the pandemic, training people who fear they have lost the ability to smile convincingly after three years of wearing masks. Students do exercises such as biting on a straw and lifting their cheek muscles to expose their upper teeth. "Just as you might exercise your arms, exercising your expressive muscles is so important," said Miho Kitano, a smile trainer. *D.Telegraph (Sydney)* 11 May 2023.



MARTIN ROSS

ANIMAL CRACKERS

Woman vs snake vs hawk, plus a duck-scoffing bulldog and more



PEGGY JONES



ABOVE LEFT: Peggy Jones points to where she was attacked first by a snake and then a hawk (inset) the injuries to her arm. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Hangzhou Zoo's sun bear; its human-like posture and saggy bottom led to accusations that it was a man in a suit.

DEATH FROM ABOVE

Peggy Jones, 64, was mowing her lawn in Silsbee, Texas, when a snake fell out of the sky and wrapped itself round her arm, only to be followed by a hawk which swooped down to reclaim its dropped meal. "As I was trying to sling my arm and sling the snake off, the snake wrapped around my arm," Jones said. "The snake was striking my face, it struck my glasses a couple of times... I was slinging and slinging, he was striking and striking, and he just kept hanging on. Then the hawk appeared just as fast as the snake appeared... The hawk grabbed the snake that was wrapped around my arm and pulled it like he was going to carry it away. And when he did, it flung my arm up. The hawk was carrying the snake and my arm and with it." The hawk repeatedly ripped at her arms with its talons as it tried to make off with its prey, which, as Jones managed to rid herself of the snake, it finally did, leaving her with damaged glasses and an injured arm. "There were puncture wounds, cuts, abrasions, scratches and severe bruising," she said. Jones admitted finding the attack traumatic, thinking she was going to die, and has had trouble

"The hawk was carrying the snake and my arm with it"

sleeping since the incident. *BBC News*, 9 Aug 2023.

BEAR FACED CHEEK?

The posture and "human actions" of a sun bear at Hangzhou Zoo in China, as well as a visibly sagging bottom when it stands on its hind legs, have led to accusations that the creature is, in fact, a zoo employee in a bear suit. Chinese zoos have previously been caught dyeing dogs to look like wolves and painting donkeys with stripes to disguise them as zebras (**FT309:8**). In 2021 a video from a zoo in Xichang showed a golden retriever in a cage marked "African lion", while, when gorillas at a zoo in Changzhou were unmasked as staff wearing gorilla costumes, the director claiming that the "human gorillas" were merely an April Fool's Day stunt. Suspensions were raised about the sun bear due to its complete inability to catch snacks thrown into its enclosure

and the human-like way it sat down on a rock in a resigned fashion after repeatedly missing them. However, the zoo's deputy director, Jiang Zhi, pointed out that "in the summer, temperatures can rise to nearly 40°C (104°F). If a person did wear a bear costume, they would be lying down within minutes due to the heat." He added that Malaysian sun bears are smaller and slimmer than better known species of bear and do have skin that sags when they stand on their hind legs, so this one really was the animal they claimed it to be. *thetimes.co.uk*, 31 Jul 2023.

SCAREDY MICE

Researchers at McGill University in Canada studying pain sensitivity in mice found that when pregnant females used in another experiment were kept close by, their male mice became "aggressive" and had "super-high pain thresholds". As this discovery had the potential to badly skew their results (and those of any other mouse experiments where pregnant females have been kept near males) they investigated further. They found that the males had a stress reaction to the smell of n-pentyl acetate, a chemical in pregnant mouse urine. This is probably because



ABOVE: The 11 rubber ducks extracted from the stomach of a French bulldog. **BELOW:** The duck-swallowing mutt in the operating theatre, and an X-ray showing the surprising contents of his tummy.

young male mice pose a threat to baby mice, and female mice respond extremely violently to their presence when they have young, so the males are afraid of them. Coincidentally n-pentyl acetate is also the chemical that gives bananas their smell, so researchers tested the male mice with cotton wool soaked in banana oil and found that this produced exactly the same stress response. As a result, they noted that not only could the presence of pregnant female mice skew experimental results, but so could a researcher eating a banana. *popsci.com*, 30 Aug 2023.

NOT JUST ORCAS

Orcas, it seems, are not the only cetaceans that have it in for humans (FT401:17, 412:21, 435:24). Although better known for their benign interactions with people, bottlenose dolphins off Suishohama beach in the town of Mihama, Japan, have recently taken to attacking swimmers. A man in his 60s suffered broken ribs and bites to his hands after a dolphin rammed him a few yards off the beach, while later the same day a man in his 40s was bitten on his arms and two more people were injured in dolphin attacks. In all, six attacks have been recorded in the area this year. It was not clear whether the same dolphin was responsible for all the assaults, or whether it was something the whole pod had taken to doing, but local authorities have now put signs up telling swimmers to avoid approaching



or touching the mammals. Dolphin researchers suggest that wild bottlenose dolphins find swimming alongside humans “incredibly stressful” and have found it disrupts their normal behavioural routines. *BBC News*, 16 Jul 2023.

THEY'LL EAT ANYTHING

A Shanghai woman named as Ms Liu had accumulated a collection of rubber ducks, given out as freebies when she bought drinks, but after spotting that a red duck had disappeared, she then noticed several more had also vanished from her collection, and suspicion immediately fell on her French bulldog. She took the dog to the vet, where he was X-rayed, revealing at least five ducks in his stomach. He was rushed into emergency surgery, where vets not only extracted the five ducks they had spotted, but a further six as well – 11 in total. Doctors told Liu that her bulldog was lucky to be alive as dogs cannot



digest rubber and the number of ducks he'd scoffed had been enough to block his intestine, which could have led to fatal complications if they hadn't been promptly removed.

In Portsmouth, Hampshire, Lola Mai-Wellington realised something was wrong when her four-year-old dog Mazikine started vomiting up screws and blood. Rushed to the vets, it was discovered that the animal had eaten 14 screws that had been dropped on the floor during some recent DIY work, which had to be removed by surgery, with five screws being found in her stomach and one in her intestines.

A bizarrely shaped rattlesnake found on the New Mexico prairie also required veterinary intervention after it was found to have swallowed a mouse, along with the mousetrap in which it had been caught. *nypost.com*, 27 Aug; *<i>*, 1 Jul; *D.Mirror*, 22 Jul 2023.

SIDELINES

TOY CAR CRASH

Motorists on the Malaysian island of Langkawi called police after seeing a Toyota being driven erratically late at night. By the time they caught up, it had crashed into a lamp post. Inside, officers found two brothers aged six and three, who explained: “Mama is at home and we are going to the store, we want to buy a black car.” The older boy said they had taken the Toyota while their “mother was in the bathroom and father was asleep” and had managed to drive 2.5km before the crash, which they escaped with only minor injuries. *editionscnn.com*, 10 May 2023.

PIPE DOWN

The disappearance of a rusty pole in Exmouth, Devon, that had acted as a vent for the sewer system since 1909 has caused a furore in the town. It had become a tourist attraction, which TripAdvisor said was one of the “Best Things to Do” there, and Mike Menhenitt of The Rusty Pole Society said: “It was safe, hurt no-one and provided a much-loved focal point.” Its disappearance thwarted the society's plan to use it as a Maypole, but East Devon Council said it had been removed due to safety concerns and would soon be replaced with “a more modern vent”. *Metro*, 27 Apr 2023.

NUMBER'S UP

Christofer Ritsov, 28, was given a community sentence in Sydney, Australia, after being arrested for a four-hour rampage in the Brighton Le Sands area during which he bent or stole the number plates on 114 cars. He was unable to explain his actions, but admitted illicit drugs had been involved. *D.Telegraph (Sydney)*, 4 April 2023.

STINGING SUCCESS

The World Nettle-Eating Championships, reputedly held in Dorset since the 1500s, involve competitors eating as many 2ft (0.6m) nettle stems as possible in an hour. The 2023 women's champion, Bethan Jones, 37, from Barry Island in Wales, ate her way through 60ft (18m) of nettles and said: “My fingers are a bit sore, but my mouth is not too bad.”. The record is 104ft (32m), set in 2018. *Sun* 26 Jun 2023.



SIDELINES...

TELEPORTATION?

For more than 10 years, VHS tapes of the horror film *Hellraiser* have been appearing on top of a bus shelter on the Old Kent Road in London, near the junction with East Street. They are only visible from the top floor of a double decker bus and even when removed, they always reappear, sometimes up to four at a time. They can even be seen there on Google Street View from as far back as 2012. Local resident Jack Rogers says, "The most I have seen up there is three. No idea how they get there, no idea who regulates it." *Sun*, 24 May 2023.

MORE TELEPORTATION

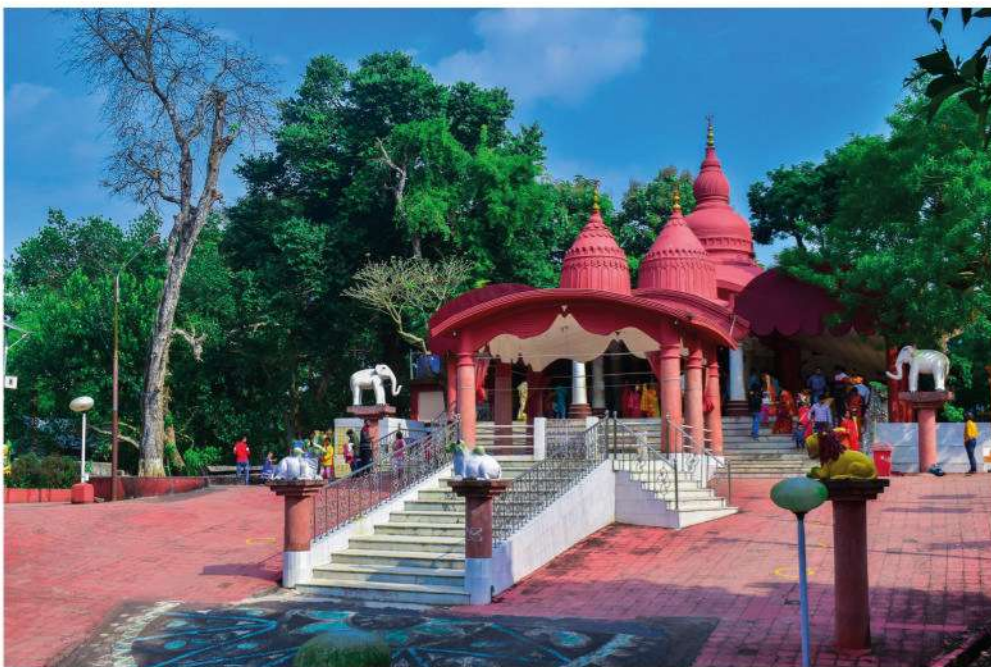
Rose Ritchie, 78, has been baffled by the mysterious appearance of eggs in her garden in Studley, Warwickshire. The first appeared buried in a plant pot, while others have turned up in soil around her pond, six or seven in all. The eggs had markings indicating they came from shops, so couldn't have been taken from hen coops by animals. It was then suspected that they came from a skip outside a nearby Tesco, but they continued to appear after the shop closed. "It doesn't keep me awake at night," said Rose, "and it's quite nice to have a bit of mystery in life." *Stratford-on-Avon Herald*, 25 May 2023.

ALIEN ATTENBOROUGH

In a public poll of 2,000 Britons to nominate the ideal person to represent Earth should we be visited by aliens, the most popular choice was wildlife Presenter Sir David Attenborough. Other favoured candidates for Earth's ambassador included Professor Brian Cox, President Obama and Greta Thunberg, but Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Bear Grylls and disgraced ex-Prime Minister Boris Johnson also got significant numbers of votes. *Metro*, 2 May 2022.



GHOSTLY GOINGS-ON | Haunted shopping trolleys and Indian polts



ABOVE: The Kasebari Kali Temple in Tipura, Madhupur, India, has been under siege from an apparent poltergeist. **BELOW:** The possessed shopping trolley that attacked Coby Todd's beloved car. **FACING PAGE:** Eilish Poe's ordeal left her able to see ghosts.

TEMPLE TROUBLE

Two families residing near the Kasbesari Kali Temple in Madhupur, India, have spent more than eight months besieged by an apparent poltergeist. It started with stones, bricks, and even bottles being hurled at Khokon Chakraborty's house at all hours, with all attempts to catch the culprits drawing a blank. The phenomenon then expanded to the neighbouring house, belonging to Swapan Chakraborty, which was also pelted with objects. Witnesses report that the missiles seem to materialise out of thin air and that they often cannot be seen by neighbours or passers-by until they have smashed against the houses. Inhabitants of both properties also say that fragments of stones and bricks are frequently discovered indoors beneath beds and inside refrigerators. The phenomenon seems to encompass an abandoned building next to the Chakraborty houses as well, with the sound of shattering glass being repeatedly heard when there is no one inside. The two families have



attempted to purge whatever is hurling items at their homes by having sorcerers perform tantric rituals, but despite spending considerable amounts of money on these exorcisms, at the time of the most recent report they had not succeeded in halting the onslaught. *indiatoday.in*, 18 Jun 2023.

TROLLEY OF TERROR

As Coby Todd, 21, of Pottsboro, Texas, was leaving the supermarket where he worked, a shopping trolley hit his car, denting the door. "I just got the car, and it's my baby... It [the cart] put a big dent in

it, and it upset me," he said, continuing, "I thought someone had tossed it at me, but when I got out there was no one there, so I went inside to get the video footage." On the video, a stationary shopping cart can be seen to flip round then head straight for Todd's car, hitting the door. Todd does not believe it was wind blowing the trolley as it was a still day and the car was sheltered by the supermarket building. Instead, he believes the trolley was pushed into his car by a ghostly child. He had been ghost hunting at the nearby Frontier Village the previous



day, where he had sensed a “little boy” spirit that he thinks followed him home and then to work. “Maybe he was trying to play with me,” he said. *foxnews.com*, 30 Mar 2023.

THE OLD MAN

Spotting a movement in her back garden that she suspected might be rats, Julie Byrne, 60, checked the security camera and later posted the footage to Facebook. It seemed to show a translucent human figure, possibly wearing a head torch, emerge from her shed and cross the garden. It then seems to pass right through a solid wooden fence into a neighbour’s garden, before returning to Byrne’s. Dubbed “the Old Man” by Byrne’s friends who have seen the clip, due to his slow pace and hunched over appearance, the figure wanders about the gardens and seems to keep stopping and bending down before finally disappearing. Byrne does not believe the “ghost” is an illusion caused by a torch light or insect on the camera, as these things “wouldn’t pass through the fence”. She adds, “It’s not a spider either. We’ve seen spiders on it – they’re bright white and you can see them crawling across. I’ve never seen anything like this before.” Byrne now plans to research the history of the area to see if she can find out anything about “the old man”, saying “I’ll be on the lookout for more stuff like this in the future, especially around that shed.” *walesonline.co.uk*, 11 Sept 2023.

SEEING SHADOW PEOPLE

After Eilish Poe, 25, ended her relationship with Jonathan Crossley, he broke into her house in Fort Collins, Colorado, and lay in wait for her in the crawlspace for 26 hours before lunging out and frenziedly stabbing her, inflicting severe injuries and leaving her near death.

As she felt her life slip away, Poe says she saw three “crystal clear” ghosts, described as a “carousel of people”, appearing in a bathroom doorway two feet from where she was lying. The first was her grandmother, who “was standing there just kind of quaintly smiling”; as she



“I think she was there to help me live. She was there as a warning”

faded out, a close friend who had committed suicide faded in, again with a comforting smile on her face, but when she disappeared, she was replaced by someone Poe knew of, but had not met. This was a local woman, Alyssa Burkett, who had been murdered by her boyfriend just a month before. “Her eyes were like bulging out of her head, she looked frantic, it was urgent,” said Poe. Burkett’s ghost “pushed the air” with her hands and “When that happened it felt like her energy was passing through me,” Poe said. “The next thing I know, she literally pulled me up, and I was sitting upright, and I hadn’t been sitting upright on my own, the entire time,” an action Poe believes saved her life, enabling her to reach her phone and call for help.

“A lot of people have been like: ‘that was just your brain surviving, or an angel!’,” she said, “but what I am telling you is it was as real as seeing an alive person in the room – it wasn’t ghostly. I think Alyssa was there

to help me live. She was there as a warning.”

However, Poe’s brush with the other side did not end there. Months later, as she recovered from her injuries, she began seeing “shadow people”. “I started seeing these shadowy figures, they used to only be in the corner of my eye,” Poe said. “Then, it kind of escalated to seeing them in front of me as clear as can be, but also not clear because it was a staticky type person, a figure always in the shape of a human... I’ve seen them probably between 50 and 100 times – like a lot.” Poe also says she has developed limited psychic powers, predicting a colleague’s pregnancy, picking up impressions from items in thrift stores and correctly foreseeing that Crossley had committed suicide after the attack by jumping from a nearby precipice, before she had recovered enough to have been given this information by police.

She says, though, that as recovery continues, her psychic abilities are fading and the “shadow people” encounters are becoming less frequent. Poe believes this is because they entered her psyche as she “sat on the precipice between life and death” and are fading as she gets further from that point. *dailymail.co.uk*, 13 Aug 2023.

SIDELINES...

CEREAL KILLER?

The Shahroodi family in Amersham, Buckinghamshire, have been spooked by a prankster who leaves cereal boxes outside their home every Saturday. The first time, someone banged at the door and when Mr Shahroodi answered there was no one there, but a large cereal box, a bit of milk and a spoon had been left outside. Next week, the same thing happened, with the pranksters leaving one big cereal box and several smaller ones. “The third time was outside on the pavement – just one big box and smaller ones, all of them were open,” Mrs Shahroodi said, “What are they trying to tell us?” *bucksfreepress.co.uk*, 6 Apr 2023.

FOOTING THE BILL

While staying in the Hilton Hotel in Nashville on a business trip, Pete Brennan awoke at 5am to find the hotel’s night manager, David Neal, sucking his toes. “It was almost like a dream, a sort of nightmare,” he said. “It just didn’t make sense”. Neal said that he had smelled smoke and had used his key card to let himself in to check on the guest but was still arrested for aggravated burglary and assault. *msn.com*, 8 May 2023.

NOT SO GENEROUS

A man throwing \$50 bills in the air caused traffic chaos in Guelph, Ontario, as drivers stopped in the road to try and grab the free cash, only to find it was fake and stamped “film prop”. Police are hunting the man they believe to be responsible, described as aged about 30, wearing shorts, a yellow T-shirt and a backpack, and accompanied by a large dog. *cbc.ca*, 5 Jul 2023.

DAM!

Food inspector Rajesh Vishwas was suspended after he emptied a reservoir in the Indian state of Chhattisgarh to retrieve a phone he dropped while taking a selfie. Claiming the phone contained sensitive government information, he got permission to “drain some water into a nearby canal” after local divers failed to find it. He then hired a diesel pump and over six days emptied the reservoir of two million litres (440,000 gallons) of water before an official realised what was happening and stopped him. He did retrieve his phone, but it was too water damaged to work again. *BBC News*, 26 May 2023.



SIDELINES...

PENNY DREADFUL

Cleaning out the basement of his late father-in-law's Los Angeles home, John Reyes and his wife discovered an estimated million copper pennies dating from before 1943. It took them a day to remove them all from the basement and they weighed their car down so much that they had to travel in the slow lane, but they hit an unexpected snag when trying to cash them in for their \$10,000 (£8,000) face value: no bank had room in their vaults to take them. They suspect the haul contains rare and valuable coins, but rather than combing through whole lot, they put the entire haul up for sale online for \$25,000 *BBC News*, 10 Jun 2023.

CLOWN TUNNEL

Residents of Worle in Somerset took to social media to raise concerns about someone dressed as a clown haunting an underpass on the A370. The clown was allegedly jumping out at people and brandishing an inflatable chainsaw, but police said nothing had been reported to them. *somersetlive.co.uk*, 30 Oct 2022.

X-RAY SPEX

Three men from Kerala were arrested in Chennai, India, for attempting to sell spectacles that would help the wearer see through clothes. They targeted rich businessmen and after showing them videos of how the spectacles worked took them to a "secret location" where they could try them out. There, they had arranged for models to pose nude in a darkened room and succeeded in fooling three customers into buying a pair. They also attempted to sell a "rice pulling" vessel, which they claimed was made of copper and iridium that had been struck by lightning, giving it special powers to bring the owner prosperity. *timesofindia.indiatimes.com*, 7 May 2023.



MARTIN ROSS

"BY SATAN'S HAND" | The FBI says the 764 group is targeting vulnerable children

On 12 September, the FBI issued a public warning about an organisation named 764, although it also has several other aliases, which they consider an offshoot of the Satanic groups Order of Nine Angles and the related Tempel ov Blood (see FT305:7, 410:4). They had uncovered the group's existence when investigating social media posts made by Angel Almeida, 23, from Astoria, in Queens, New York, after being tipped off about their content, which included images of violence against children and animals. Almeida had also expressed support for white supremacist killer Dylann Roof, while other posts showed him shirtless while brandishing a shotgun, and wearing a skull mask with bandoliers of rifle ammunition strapped across his chest. Searching Almeida's apartment, investigators found a 9mm handgun, ammunition, books relating to the Order of Nine Angles, and a flag bearing the insignia of the Tempel ov Blood. He had also prepared an O9A "blood covenant". This was a blood-smeared drawing of a hooded figure with glowing red eyes surrounded with the sigils for four O9A deities and the caption "Vindex, Nythra, Satan and Abatu" and an oath, "A covenant signed in blood. May the DEVIL walk with you always – SATANAE MANIBUS" ("by Satan's Hand" in Latin). A similar O9A and Tempel ov Blood related covenant, allegedly signed by the demon Lucifuge Rofocale, was found among the possessions of Danyal Hussein in London in 2021. He murdered Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman to fulfil its terms, believing it would enable him to win the lottery (FT409:28, 410:4).

O9A and Tempel ov Blood followers have frequently been accused of child abuse, and the FBI warning states that



LEFT: Angel Almeida's 'blood-covenant', bearing a drawing of a hooded figure and an oath. BELOW: An image of a gun-toting Almeida from one of his social media posts.



764 are "deliberately targeting minor victims on publicly available messaging platforms to extort them into recording or livestreaming acts of self-harm and producing child sexual abuse material". They allege that 764 use gaming communication platforms like Twitch and Discord, as well as games themselves, such as Roblox, and curated playlists on SoundCloud, to seek out young people of colour, youths identifying as LGBTQ+ or those who are struggling with mental health issues. The FBI claims 764 then "use threats, blackmail and manipulation" to get victims to record videos showing acts of self-harm, animal cruelty, sexual acts and even suicide that they use to further extort and control them. The FBI estimate that 764 has at least two thousand participants, with several hundred who are highly active, making the child abuse and gore

videos posted to the group's media channels. Almeida is accused of having coerced a teenage girl into having sexual relations with an older man and of convincing another girl to cut herself, record the act on camera and send it to him.

In Romania, 764 is believed to have inspired a German youth in foster care in

the country to murder a woman. Named (pseudonymously) as Luca, the boy first attacked an 82-year-old man in Media, slashing him with a knife and "causing the victim to bleed profusely", inflicting wounds that put the man in hospital for several weeks. Luca filmed the assault and posted it on 764 channels, but this escaped notice by authorities, allowing him to remain free to attack a 74-year-old woman, cutting her throat and kicking her to death. Luca also filmed this attack and shared it with 764 members, saying: "I feel like God. I can decide who lives and who dies." However, the murder was caught on CCTV and police swiftly arrested Luca, finding his video of the killing on his phone. They also found "a lot of material with violence in every imaginable form, beheadings, bombings, abused children". Luca was found to have "764" tattooed on his arm, along with "Necro" and a swastika, and in his bedroom the number was painted across one of the walls, alongside "Satanic" and Nazi symbols. In prison awaiting trial he has been described as "hostile" and has set fire to his cell, although psychiatric evaluation has judged him sane enough to stand trial. *theguardian.com*, 28 Sept; *www-libertatea-ro*, 24 Mar 2023.



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

290: IN MEMORIAM

This is an intensely personal column. My beloved wife, Janet, died some weeks ago. Naturally, I wrote an obituary of her for the local newspaper. Work being my only solace and distraction from grief, I thought it an appropriate moment to illustrate how Roman (there are also Greek examples available) men commemorated their womenfolk. (This does not arise in the case of Fort, who predeceased his wife Anna. As reported in Steinmeyer's biography (p274), the *New York Herald Tribune* headed its obituary with "Foe of Science", going on to describe him as "a quiet man with a dread of society" who had written "four astonishing and disturbing books.")

Richmond Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Roman Epitaphs* (1962) provides a cornucopia of texts and translations, as do Mary Lefkowitz and Maureen Fant in their *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* (1982). A rich selection is also given by Brandon Conley in "Roman Epitaphs to and for Wives" on the *Sententiae Antiquae* website.

Lattimore (p277) observes that "Records of devotion between husband and wife are enormously frequent in Latin inscriptions, both verse and prose." The poetic ones are analysed in AB Purdie's *Some Observations on Latin Verse Inscriptions* (1935). The texts are derived from the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* and cognate collections.

I kick off with one of the most often quoted ones: "Friend, I have not much to say. Stop and read it. This is the unfair tomb of a fair woman. Her parents called her Claudia. She loved her husband with all her heart. She bore two sons, leaving one on Earth, the other below it. She was pleasant to talk with and was graceful in gait. She looked after the house and worked in wool. That is all. You may go."

It was an epitaphic convention to address passers-by. The mention of losing a child reminds us of the high ancient incidence of infant mortality – the Greek and Roman goddesses of childbirth, Eileithia and Lucina, had a dismal protective record. Working the wool was a common detail in such epitaphs. Suetonius in his *Life of Augustus* (ch73) claims that emperor wore garments homespun by his wife Livia – not the impression we got of her in the televised *I, Claudius*.

It is, I suppose, possible that Claudia wrote her own obituary. Such things do happen. I remember years ago being asked to write my own by the Royal Society of Canada, of which I have the honour to be



an elected Fellow. You may well imagine how I felt when penning the last line: "Barry Baldwin died on..."

The butcher Lucius Aurelius Hermia honoured his lost love thus: "My wife who died before me, chaste in body, my one and only, who ruled my heart, she lived as a faithful wife to her faithful husband, with affection equal to my own, since she never let avarice keep her from her duties."

Can't help noticing the amount of self-praise smuggled into this tribute.

There are countless simple ones like the following: "To the Spirits of the Dead. Lucius Sammonius Adjutor made this for the memory of Publicia Septimina, his most faithful wife and most living soul."

The following is somewhat more ambitious: "My beautiful faithful wife Sabina lies encased in stone. Skilled in the arts, she alone surpassed her husband. Her voice was sweet as she plucked the strings with her thumb. But taken suddenly, she now is silent." Again, note a touch of husbandly self-praise.

Primus, her husband, honoured his wife Claudia Piste with a handsome and expensive marble tomb and a sorrowful poem, either written by himself or (as some less romantic souls think) commissioned from a professional versifier, a notion I think refuted by its sometimes wavering grammar. The poem is too long to quote in full; Latin text in *CIL* 6. 155446. In it, Primus reprimands the Fates for cutting her life short by death in childbirth.

At 180 lines (more are lost), the *Laudatio*

LEFT: A stone funerary relief of Lucius Aurelius Hermia and his wife.

Turiae (Praise of Turia) is the longest extant personal inscription from Rome. It is commonly thought that she was the wife of Quintus Lucretius Vespillo, consul in 19 BC, given the supporting historical evidences from Valerius Maximus (bk6 ch7 para2) and Appian (Civil Wars, bk4 ch44). I cannot quote the whole thing. Happily, there is an online translation by E Wistrand. A brief summary must suffice. Turia is praised both for sending him jewellery and money when he was in exile and for offering him a divorce that he might remarry and have an heir – the couple being apparently destined to remain childless – how would an ancient know about infertility? Turia was also remarkable for avenging her parents' murder and for enduring physical and verbal abuse from Lepidus (named in the obituary) when she pleaded her husband's case. Alongside these striking highlights come conventional praises for her wool-working (how did she find the time?), wifely obedience and fidelity. The marriage lasted 40 years (mine went to 55), husband being much older.

I will quote the final paragraph, which exemplifies my own feelings for Janet:

"Natural grief overcomes my self-control; I am overwhelmed by sorrow. I am tormented by the twin emotions of grief and fear, and quail before both. When I consider my future, fixing my thoughts on your dear self, does not give me the strength to bear my sorrow with patience. Rather do I seem destined to a long mourning."

The most discussed Roman obituary is that of Allia Potestas, a freedwoman living sometime in the imperial period. Found in 1912, it is a poem written (it seems) by a lover rather than a husband, but may fairly take its place here. The poem combines the standard womanly domestic virtues (wool work and devotion to house chores, etc) with acceptance of her polyandry (she maintained a pair of lovers) and a somewhat erotic catalogue of her physical charms: "She had white skin, beautiful eyes, blonde hair. Her face had a perpetual ivory-like glow. The curve of her breasts was small upon her snow-white bosom. And her legs were like those of Atalanta (sc. ancient Greek woman famous for her speedy running – BB)."

PAUL SIEVEKING unearths German rainbow cups, a rare backgammon set and some fishy remains



CATHERINE SOUTHON / BNPS

BACKGAMMON FIND

We realise this report is three years late, but the discovery was so extraordinary that we thought better late than never.

Back in the 1960s, a young girl found a 16th century backgammon set on a scrapheap in south-east London. After taking it home, she realised its counters were missing, so went back and managed to retrieve all 30 of them. Each of the stained boxwood counters 2in (5cm) in diameter, is engraved with male and female classical and biblical busts conforming to those on the case, engraved in the manner of Virgil Solis (1514-1562), a prominent print maker in Nuremberg. Crafted from rosewood, the board is 2ft (61cm) wide. The unnamed finder kept it under her sofa for half a century before taking it to an auctioneer's valuation day. Experts believe the set was made in Augsburg, southern Germany, in about 1590, possibly for a rich merchant or someone in the Habsburg court. The exterior of the hinged boards is inlaid with a chessboard, having foliate engraved grid, the white squares inlaid with bone profile medallions corresponding to those on the counters, the reverse inlaid with a Nine Men's Morris or Merels board.

Antiques expert Tom Blest realised it was better than the only other one of its kind known to survive, held by the Victoria and Albert Museum (no. 567-1899), the counters for which are lost. The close similarity of the eight corner roundels of the board in the V&A with those on the case and draughtsmen of the one offered for sale suggests a close relationship between the two, perhaps originating from the same workshop. The

The padlock is “meant to protect against the return of the deceased, which was probably feared”

set fetched £30,000 at Catherine Southon Auctioneers of Bromley, Kent, on 23 February 2020. *D.Mail, D.Telegraph, 4 Feb 2020, plus data from the auctioneers.*

- What is thought to be the oldest backgammon set ever found was discovered in the ruins of the so-called Burnt City in Sistan-Baluchestan province, south eastern Iran, destroyed by fire in 2100 BC. The board was made of ebony from India and curiously had 60 counters, twice the number for the modern version of the game. It is up to 200 years older than backgammon boards found at Mesopotamian sites in what is now Iraq. *[AFP] 7 Dec 2004.*

VAMPIRE CHILD

Archaeologists have found the remains of a so-called “vampire child” dating to the 17th century in a Pien, Poland, cemetery. The skeletal scraps, estimated to be from a child aged between five to seven, were discovered lying face down with a triangular padlock attached to one of its feet. Archaeologist Dariusz Polinski noted that the item placed under the foot “symbolizes the closing of a stage of life and is meant to protect against the return of the deceased, which was probably feared. Such practices originated in folk beliefs and are sometimes



NICOLAUS COPERNICUS UNIVERSITY

ABOVE LEFT: The remarkable backgammon set saved from a scrapheap. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The ‘vampire child’ with a padlock attached to one foot.

described as anti-vampiric.”

In the same graveyard in September 2022, Polinski and his team unearthed a “vampire woman” with a sickle seemingly restraining her neck and a padlock on the big toe of her left foot (**FT425:12**). “Ways to protect against the return of the dead include cutting off the head or legs, placing the deceased face down to bite into the ground, burning them and smashing them with a stone,” Polinski said. *nypost.com, 7 Aug 2023.*

KINGS UNDER CAR PARKS

In 2012 Philippa Langley – through a combination of research and intuition – famously identified the spot in a Leicester car park beneath which lay the skeleton of King Richard III, killed in 1485 (**FT299:4-5**). She now believes that the bones of King Henry I (reigned 1100-1135) lie under the tarmac of a Ministry of Justice-owned car park at Reading Jail, under a parking area marked on a survey with the letter ‘K’. (Readers may recall that, by strange coincidence, Richard’s grave was marked by a large letter ‘R’ painted in white – for ‘reserved parking’.) Langley has formed the Hidden Abbey project to help raise funds for the estimated £55,000 cost of a dig at the site of Reading Jail, which was closed in 2013 and is awaiting redevelopment.

Henry I is the only English monarch since William the Conqueror who has no identifiable grave (see **FT426:66**). He

holds the record for the largest number of acknowledged illegitimate children born to any English king, with around 20 to 25 offspring born out of wedlock. He fell ill while hunting in Normandy after eating “a surfeit of” lampreys (jawless fish) and died on 1 December 1135. His body was taken to Rouen, where his entrails were buried locally at the priory of Notre-Dame du Pré, while his embalmed corpse was returned to England. Records show it was interred at Reading Abbey, which the king had founded 14 years earlier “for the salvation of my soul”. However, the grave’s location has been lost. Largely destroyed in 1538, the Abbey was used as both a town hall and a school until the jail was built on the eastern side of the site in 1844. In 1921 a plaque was erected over the area where the Abbey’s high altar – the area historical records indicate Henry I was buried – once stood. However, Langley believes her calculations show the altar may have been moved at some point, so historians have been looking in the wrong place. In 2016 ground-penetrating radar revealed what looked like two sarcophagus burials in the area where Langley believes the original high altar stood in the spot she identified in the former prison car park. “Whether these are the burials of Henry I and Constance of York naturally forms one of the many research questions for the Hidden Abbey Project”, she said. *D.Mail, 13 June 2023.*

RAINBOW CUPS

- A hoard of 41 Celtic gold coins was found in 2017 near the village of Baitz in Brandenburg, a state in northeastern Germany. The coins are curved, a feature that inspired the German name *regenbogenschüsselchen* (rainbow cups). Just like the legend that there’s a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, in popular belief, rainbow cups were believed to have fallen to Earth at the end of a rainbow and were considered lucky charms and objects with a healing effect.

By comparing the weight and size of the coins with those of other ancient rainbow cups, archaeologists were able to date the hoard’s minting to between 125 BC and 30 BC. At that time, the core areas of the Celtic archaeological culture of La Tène (about 450 BC to the Roman conquest in the first century BC) occupied the regions of what is now England, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, southern Germany and the Czech Republic. Because the coins in the stash are similar, it’s likely that the hoard was deposited all at once. Of the 41 coins, 19 are coins known as staters, and 22 are quarter staters. The entire stash is imageless, meaning they are ‘plain rainbow cups’. It’s the second largest hoard of ‘plain’ rainbow cups of this type ever found – but it’s

a mystery why it ended up in Brandenburg. Celts did not live in Brandenburg, so the discovery suggests that Iron Age Europe had extensive trade networks. *livescience.com, 13 Jan 2022.*

- A single rainbow cup was unearthed last spring about 45 miles (70km) west of Munich on the Lech River in Bavaria, near an ancient road. This road went from what is now Trento in northern Italy and later became known as the Roman road Via Claudia Augusta that went across the Alps. The coin, which weighs 0.07oz (1.9g) and is 13mm wide, features a rare design of a four-pointed star surrounded by arches. One side shows a stylised human head with a large eye, with the nose and lips depicted as dots. A metal analysis revealed that the coin is 77% gold, 18% silver and 5% copper. There are only three known rainbow cups with the star-and-arch motif. Numismatist Bernward Ziegeus said the star is perhaps a symbol for the four cardinal points, while the arches might be understood as signs for the horizon and the rising and setting of the Moon. He said one legend about rainbow cups is that “they can only be found by Sunday children, or a child of fortune. In fact, the finder was born on a Sunday and is indeed a Sunday child, a lucky child!” *livescience.com, 9 Sept 2023.*

EARLY SEAFOOD SUPPERS

- The first ever hot dinner may have been a two-metre (6.5ft) carp cooked 780,000 years ago in what is now Israel. It is believed that cooked fish was a dietary staple for hunter-

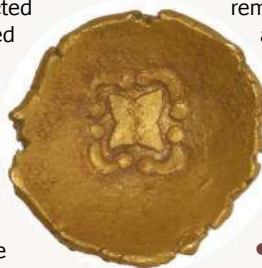
gatherers in the region for millennia. The fish was easy to catch year-round as part of a varied diet. Charred carp teeth were found scattered around the Gesher Benot Ya’akov site near Hula Lake on the Jordan river.

Scientists believe the fish were cooked on a low heat and there was possibly “some kind of earth oven that maintained a temperature below 50°C”. Dr Jens Najorka, the study’s author, said: “Given lack of evidence of exposure to high temperatures, it is clear that the fish were not cooked directly in fire, and were not thrown into a fire as waste or material for burning... This is the earliest evidence of cooking by hominins.” The fish could have been served with a salad as

remains of fruit, nuts and seeds were

also found at the site, along with meat from mammals. Before this discovery, the earliest evidence of the use of fire for cooking was about 170,000 years ago. *D.Telegraph, D.Mail, Sun, 15 Nov 2022.*

- The Portuguese capital Lisbon is famous for its salted cod, sardines and stuffed brown crab. Those crabs have been on the menu for a long time. In Gruta da Figueira Brava, a cave site not far from the city, charred remains of crab shells and claws have been found, evidence that Neanderthals were cooking and eating crab 90,000 years ago. The cave was about a mile from the coast when Neanderthals lived there, but rising sea levels since then have slowly brought the Atlantic to the cave door. Getting there today involves a climb down a craggy cliff face overlooking the sea. *D.Star, 7 Feb; Times, 18 Feb 2023.*



ABOVE: Some of the curved coins known as *regenbogenschüsselchen* or rainbow cups found in Brandenburg.
TOP: A single rainbow cup with a rare star design unearthed on the Lech River in Bavaria.



March of the mundane?

Is the world less mysterious than it was in 1973? Not necessarily, says **DAVID HAMBLING**

The landscape of unexplained phenomena was very different in 1973. Naturalists were on the trail of the Loch Ness Monster and expeditions were mounted to track down yetis. Uri Geller's displays of psychokinetic powers on live television suggested a breakthrough was imminent, while Erich von Däniken topped bestseller lists explaining how aliens built ancient monuments. Evidence was piling up for weird disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle. Science seemed set for a golden age of incredible discoveries.

Decades on, we have complaints of 'Middle Age Mulder' syndrome, the disillusionment of those who want to believe as ugly facts invade beautiful narratives. This tends to be a gradual process, as in the case of Nessie. Repeated surveys with increasingly sophisticated instruments turned up nothing, and the 1934 Surgeon's Photograph, one of the best pieces of evidence, was determined to be a fake in the 1990s. There indeed might be a monster in the Loch, but belief now takes a greater leap of faith.

The same applies to Uri Geller and the Bermuda Triangle. In the 1970s Geller was taken seriously enough to be part of a US Government programme looking into military applications of remote viewing. While Geller still maintains he has genuine psychic powers, he is now positioned more as a television personality with a message about the power of positive thought. And more detailed study of the Bermuda Triangle, while duller than the fantastic stories told by proponents, show the area does not see any more disappearances of ships or aircraft than average.

Frauds will always make outrageous claims to sell books and win fame, and get debunked at a steady rate. There is also such a thing as scientific progress. If we take the publication of Newton's landmark *Principia Mathematica* in 1687 as the starting pistol for the Scientific Revolution, modern science has been grinding away for 330 years, and *Fortean Times* has witnessed about a sixth of that.

Fifty years of science should clear up a few unexplained mysteries, but maybe the real complaint is that scientific explanations are less colourful than the original folklore. As far back as 1817 the poet Keats complained that Newton "has destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow, by reducing it to the prismatic colours." Scientific discovery is seen as the march of the mundane.



Speculation about Atlantean technology or alien intervention could not be disproven

The mechanics of the building of the pyramids or the Easter Island statues were mysteries in 1973 and speculation about Atlantean technology or alien intervention could not be disproven. But Thor Heyerdahl's 1986 demonstration of how a team of 16 labourers could 'walk' one of the Easter Island Moai into position undermined more fanciful explanations. The 1990 discovery of workers' cemeteries by the pyramids, with bones showing signs of conditions brought on by handling massive stone blocks, has given insight into the labour involved. These discoveries are less entertaining than stories of mythical beings with fantastic powers, like discovering that a magic trick is done by simple but tedious work behind the scenes.

The steady rise of CCTV, dashcams, trailcams and camera phones since the 1970s leaves less opportunity for cryptids and supernatural beings to roam the land unobserved, and their credibility has suffered. But science has also thrown up new mysteries.

In 1973 human evolution was seen as a linear progression from early hominids towards the *Homo sapiens*, with our close cousins the Neanderthals being an unlucky evolutionary dead-end. This neat pattern was destroyed by discoveries of multiple unexpected new human species, the most notable being *Homo floresiensis* found in 2003 on the island of Flores in Indonesia. *Floresiensis* stood about 1.1m (3ft 7in) tall and may have lived alongside modern humans up until 50,000 years ago. Another

LEFT: Easter Island Moai – no need for aliens.

possibly pygmy human species, dubbed *Homo luzonensis*, was discovered in the Philippines in 2019.

Modern research has also shown that the Neanderthals were not the knuckle-dragging primitives they were assumed to be in the 1970s, but had culture to rival their modern human neighbours. Nor were they a dead end; about two per cent of modern European DNA can be traced to the Neanderthals. Another species, the Denisovans, discovered in 2010 and known by skeletal fragments from just eight individuals, appear to have ranged widely across Asia until perhaps 20,000 years ago. They also interbred with humans and some Melanesians have up to six per cent Denisovan DNA, traces of a shadowy alternate human race still waiting to be brought into the light. Bigfoot and the yeti may have receded under the glare of scientific scrutiny, but we have plenty of new extinct mystery hominids to explore.

The biggest mystery of all opened up in the 1980s, when astronomical observations of distant galaxies showed they contained more mass than could be accounted for by the observed stars. This indicated that most of the Universe comprises 'dark matter' which does not interact with light and which is unlike any known substance.

If the quest for dark matter was not enough, in the late 1990s, astronomers found the expansion of the Universe was not being slowed by gravity as expected. The rate of expansion was actually increasing, powered by an unknown but powerful force known as 'dark energy.' This dark energy comprises something like 68% of the Universe, while 27% is dark matter. Our known, observed Universe makes up only about 5% of the total, so in that sense the amount of unexplained has increased dramatically.

Things have certainly moved on over the last five decades. The boundaries of the mysterious have been rolled back a little, a few illusions have been shattered. We also have a slightly better understanding of some of the psychology involved. In particular research such as Elizabeth Loftus's work on eyewitness testimony and memory have taught us that we cannot always believe what we think we saw.

There is still a lot of strangeness out there, and the scientific method is a resilient and flexible tool for exploring it.



IMPROBABILITY THEORIES

This year's Ig Nobel awards recognised cutting-edge research into nose hairs and anchovy sex

Every September, a month before the Nobel Prizes are announced, The Annals of Improbable Research reveal the recipients of their Ig Nobel Prizes, now in their 33rd year, celebrating science that makes people laugh, then think. The lucky recipients of the 2023 prizes, presented by real Nobel laureates, were, as usual, an eclectic bunch, united only by their dedication to slightly startling research.

The mechanical engineering prize went to Te Faye Yap, Daniel Preston and their colleagues at Rice University in Texas, a team whose winning innovation – reanimating dead spiders with hydraulics to use as precision micro-grippers – has previously been covered in these pages (FT424:7). They were particularly commended for coining the name “necrobiotics” for the field they have pioneered. Also commended for its use of words was a paper, called “The the the induction of jamais vu in the laboratory: Word alienation and semantic satiation”, written by a multinational team from France, the UK, Malaysia and Finland, which won the literature prize. This explored “the sensations people feel when they repeat a single word many, many, many, many, many, many, many times”, while the communication prize was landed by scientists who have researched the talents of people who are expert at speaking backwards, which include carrying out neuroimaging analyses.

Jan Zalasiewicz's essay “Eating Fossils” in the Palaeontological Association's Newsletter earned the University of Leicester researcher the chemistry and geology prize for explaining why geologists like to lick rocks. He found that the 18th-century Italian geologist Giovanni Arduino used taste to help identify rocks and minerals, but today most researchers do it because “wetting the surface allows fossil and mineral textures to stand out sharply,



PRESTON INNOVATION LAB / RICE UNIVERSITY



ABOVE: Daniel Preston, Anoop Rajappan, Zhen Liu, Trevor Shimokusu and Faye Yap: an innovative use of dead spiders. LEFT: Seung-min Park: thinking about toilets.

rather than being lost in the blur of intersecting micro-reflections and micro-refractions that come out of a dry surface”. Also concentrating on things oral, the prize for nutrition was won by Homei Miyashita from Meiji University and Hiromi Nakamura of the University of Tokyo, who carried out research on electrified chopsticks and drinking straws and found it was possible to enhance the saltiness of foods using electrical stimulation of the tongue. “The taste of food can be changed immediately and reversibly by electrical stimulation, and this is something that has been difficult to achieve with conventional ingredients such as seasonings,”

said Nakamura. An innovation concentrating on the other end of the digestive system from Seung-min Park and his team from Stanford University School of Medicine and Seoul Song Do Hospital won the public health prize. They came up with the “Stanford Toilet”, a gadget designed to analyse human excreta to diagnose people's health problems, which included an anal-print sensor paired with an identification camera.

The award for medicine went to researchers who used cadavers to explore whether each of an individual's nostrils contains an equal number of hairs. Published in the International Journal of Dermatology, the paper records

that the average nose hair count per nostril is around 120 in the corpses they examined, a process prompted by an attempt to learn the medical significance, if any, of there being hairs in one nostril but not the other in a living individual with alopecia. Katy Tam, Christian Chan and their colleagues won the education prize for their study of boredom in teachers and students, while the physics prize was also ‘school-related’: it looked at how ocean water mixing might be influenced by the sexual activity of schools of anchovies. The late Stanley Milgram and two of his students were also given a belated psychology prize for their 1969 experiment on how many passers-by stopped to look up when they saw other people looking upward.

The awards ceremony, which seems to have moved permanently online, included seven songs on the topic of water, as well as eminent researchers explaining their subjects in just 24 seconds, and then in only seven words. Winners were given a 10 trillion-dollar banknote from Zimbabwe and a pdf document that could be printed and assembled to create a three-dimensional trophy. improbable.com, Newscientist.com, theguardian.co.uk, 14 Sept 2023.

NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM ROTTERDAM



Can you catch a poltergeist?

ALAN MURDIE looks at hauntings that seemed to result in cases of paranormal contagion



ABOVE: Maurice Grosse with various 'souvenirs' of the Enfield Poltergeist; luckily, his work didn't follow him home, but this is not always the case.

We all know you can catch a cold, the 'flu, the measles or worse. Can you catch a poltergeist? Depending on your perspective, this sounds a bizarre, amusing or frightful idea.

One person who thinks researchers might be at risk, or should at least seriously consider the possibility, is Dr Peter A McCue. In an article in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* entitled 'Paranormal Contagion: A Potential Hazard for Case Investigators' (2022, vol 86, no 4 193-208) he calls attention to how, after investigating hauntings, some field researchers find phenomena breaking out around them, as though something has attached itself to them and followed them home.

He also draws attention to a possibly related area, "the matter of supposedly cursed or haunted objects (dolls, paintings, items of jewellery etc)", about which he

He experienced strange breakdowns with electronic devices after leaving a poltergeist-afflicted property

has written an interesting book, *Curses, Coincidences and Malign Influences* (2021). He further explored the idea in an on-line talk of ASSAP (the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena) in July 2023. If true, the consequences could be rather dire, given we do not know the limits of poltergeist forces.

I first heard of poltergeist contagion from researcher John Spencer at a talk

in 2001 given at the Ghost Club, where he mentioned experiencing strange breakdowns with electronic devices directly after leaving a poltergeist afflicted property. Then, in 2014, came the book *Contagion: In the Shadow of the South Shields Poltergeist* by Mike Hollowell and Darren Ritson, with dramatic accounts of a poltergeist force seemingly latching on to them (it has recently been re-issued).

One striking incident, witnessed by both authors, was in an office in the home of Mike Hollowell, after the authors had just finished a discussion of the history of the haunted premises, speculating about what originally stood on the site.

As they left the office, there suddenly came a tremendous bang behind them. Turning around, a book entitled *The Borough of South Shields* by George B Hodgson was lying in the middle of the office floor. This volume counts as the

definitive work on the history of South Tyneside's principal town, weighing almost four imperial pounds. The authors could see no normal way for it to deposit itself on the floor (turn to p.30 for the full story and an examination of other cases of poltergeist contagion).

Both ghost hunters and ufologists may encounter similar uncanny and disconcerting incidents. Examples appear in anomaly research over the years, including some well-known forteen favourites – such as the Hexham Heads (FT15:4-5, 59:43, 217:74, 220:74, 294:43-47, 295:44-49), the Cornish Owlman (FT156:44-46) and testimonies from the notorious 'Skinwalker Ranch' in the USA (FT169:44-47, 363:38-41, 398:21).

I can add a few more. In 1944 a photographer's firm engaged by Harry Price to take pictures of bone fragments from Borley Rectory complained of odd physical incidents on their premises, and the building was later destroyed by a bomb (see *The End of Borley Rectory*, 1946, by Harry Price). In November 1948 two ghost hunters at Barnwell Castle, Northamptonshire, believed they saw and heard a phantom monk; one later believed it came to his bedroom (*Haunted East Anglia*, 1974, by Joan Forman). In 1972 builders removed mummified cats from the wall of a cottage in Fakenham Magna, Suffolk, and heard unexplained footfalls afterwards. One builder, Mr Lomax, took one of the cats home to show his wife. The couple were then troubled by strange noises and a light falling out of its fixture (*Haunted Bury St*

Edmunds, 2008, by Alan Murdie).

Deciding enough such anecdotal evidence exists for contagion effects, Dr McCue reached out to 32 researchers, to find out just how many others might have met with it.

Of 18 replies, 17 investigators provided credible statements, the majority reporting no experience at all and four who thought they might have encountered contagion from a site or investigation. From this albeit limited sample, Dr McCue concludes: "Overall, contagion isn't very common amongst investigators".

I would agree this is the case for most investigators, including myself. Andrew Green (1927-2004) and Peter Underwood (1923-2014) spent many decades visiting haunted houses, but never seem to have accidentally taken their work home with them, so to speak. Maurice Grosse told me of curious physical incidents occasionally occurring at his house at Muswell Hill in London, but he didn't link them with attendance at any particular investigation. He considered the most significant of these actually occurred before he took up psychical research, following the death of his daughter Janet in a motorbike accident in 1976, prior to his involvement in the Enfield poltergeist case.

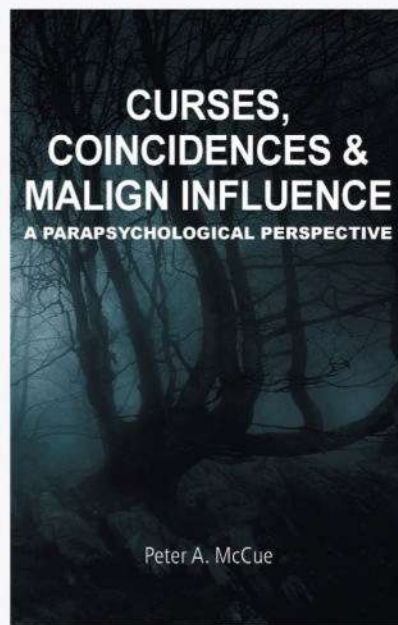
The idea of the contagion or transmission of poltergeist effects from one person to another is historically consistent with other long-standing beliefs about remote influences, witchcraft and intangible forces.

The history of occultism is filled with claims of the transfer of strange

influences between people and objects. The voluminous and international literature of mesmerism of the 18th and 19th centuries often envisaged an unknown energy passing between living persons, particularly affecting the bodies of young girls and women. Often theorists did not conceive of mesmeric influences being necessarily supernatural or spiritual in character, but as an aspect of a known existing force or form of energy, being initially linked with electricity or electromagnetism, then beginning to be harnessed. Human agents were conceived as 'living Leyden jars', the forerunners of modern electric batteries.

Then Spiritualism came along – stemming from responsive poltergeist knockings at the home of the Fox sisters at Hydesville, New York State, in 1848 – a psychokinetic phenomenon that proved hugely contagious, with many finding they could generate or imitate similar manifestations, with spirits (or fraud) taking the blame.

More widely, from a philosophical standpoint, the magical law of contagion was identified as one of the universal laws of sympathetic magic by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* in 1890, which covers such superstitions exhaustively. (Today I suspect Frazer would detect the same phenomenon in secular circles too – e.g. the taboos that spring up wherever particular individuals or products are deemed 'politically incorrect' and are shunned or cancelled, apparently from the fear that something beastly will be transmitted by contact, however remote).



ABOVE: *Fortean Times* regular Peter A McCue (seen here in intrepid climber mode) addresses the question of poltergeist contagion in his latest book.



MICHAEL J HALLOWELL & DARREN RITSON

ABOVE LEFT: Dr Fatima Regina Machado believed an emotionally troubled couple in São Paulo were generating poltergeist-like effects. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The South Shields polt up to its tricks, causing a water bottle to balance; was a cosmic 'arch poltergeist' responsible for the resulting contagion?

In the 20th century, psychical researchers such as Nandor Fodor and William Roll postulated psychokinesis from the troubled unconscious minds of living persons rather than spirits as being responsible for poltergeists (**FT286:26**).

Maurice Grosse used to state that stress was always an element in poltergeist-affected households, and reducing tension could reduce the phenomena; Charles Fort was among the first to point out connections with teenagers and effects clustering around the ill or disabled (**FT293:42-45**).

But assuming contagion is real, so that you can catch a poltergeist from somebody else or find effects from a haunted house attaching themselves to you, the idea of manifestations solely originating from living persons starts to creak. It is in even greater difficulty if the putative agent is nowhere in the vicinity, or there appears to be none at all, as where poltergeists are apparently fixed to specific locations.

At first blush, contagion effects thus seem to provide an almost overwhelming argument against the view that we are dealing purely with the subconscious mind of a single living individual, leading McCue, Ritson and Hallowell into questioning the idea of embodied human agents. Given similarities between widely separated outbreaks, they wonder if disturbances are orchestrated by some external or discarnate force. In the South Shields case, a cosmic 'arch poltergeist' was postulated, while Dr McCue proposes that a higher intelligence might manipulate a wide variety of psychic activity across the globe. In other words, the effects arise

Manifestations often reveal themselves to have complex symbolic elements

from an external super-consciousness, the nature of which we cannot grasp. In the past, others conceived of numerous little devils or elementals being at work. (Dom Robert Pettipierre, *Exorcising Devils*, 1976).

However, I am reluctant to wholly jettison the idea of living causation. Methodologically, whilst not dismissing the idea of a discarnate operator, I wonder how one would ever test for such a presence, or otherwise eliminate it. On one level, it seems like a return to primitive Protestant ideas in Early Modern times, positioning the Devil as an arch-puppet master in human affairs or, alternatively, it risks multiplying entities unnecessarily, like an ever-expanding cast of characters in some fantasy role-playing game or an unending TV soap opera.

When probed, manifestations often reveal themselves to possess complex symbolic elements, pointing to the minds of the living. Exactly this pattern arose in a case published in 2001 by Dr Fatima Regina Machado from Brazil, involving a 36-year-old woman and her husband living in São Paulo, who suffered a series of domestic disturbances they were unable to explain.

Vases, glasses and whisky tumblers were mysteriously broken. An electric clock and a stereo repeatedly came on by themselves at 3am and a baby's yellow pillowcase appeared in the middle of the bedroom floor. Interviews with them by Dr Machado revealed a troubled couple. The husband (54) was older than his wife (36) and gave her little attention, due to working long hours, exhaustion and drinking whisky when he came home. The wife craved the idea of having a family and children, yet she was unable to conceive. She had hoped to become pregnant some months earlier, only to suffer a miscarriage during the middle of the night, and she feared her chance of starting a family was gone.

Approaching this from the perspective of semiotics, or the study of signs and symbols, Dr Machado concluded they were signalling the emotions and distress of the wife following the loss of what she believed was a child. Examining the events, it was realised the clock regularly came on by itself at the same time her miscarriage had occurred and the displaced whisky tumblers reflected her dislike of her husband's drinking. From this it was concluded the poltergeist was an expression not only of the wife's "desire to have a baby, but also her desire to punish [her husband] because it was his fault they were childless."

The haunted objects in the flat were symbols of her state of mind. Researchers noticed a large collection of dolls in one room, almost substitutes for children, and the woman became very aggressive when Dr Machado tried handling one doll in particular. Throughout it had

never occurred to either the husband or wife that they might be generating the phenomena. Disturbances ceased with the couple entering therapy and taking fertility tests. It is easy to see how this might have turned into a haunted doll case if a less perceptive investigator or ghost hunter had taken it up. ('A New Look At Poltergeist and Haunting Phenomena: Analysing experiences from a semiotic perspective' by Machado, Fatima (2001) in *Hauntings and Poltergeists: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (eds. J Houran & R Lange) pp.195-213. Jefferson, NC: McFarland).

This case shares certain features with one reported in England some 30 years earlier as the 'Case of the Flying Thermometer' by Mary Rose Barrington (see *Journal of the SPR* Vol.43 1965-66 11-20), where an unhappy wife had reluctantly undergone an abortion. The resolution of mental anxieties may end the phenomena. Rarely do poltergeist agents seem aware of their own talents, and individuals may need to rationalise abilities to themselves as being powers given by spirits or by the inhabitants of interstellar civilisations, rather than an expression of their own emotional state. In many walks of life, people don't like the idea of personal responsibility or autonomy, or struggle to make decisions involving themselves. These feelings may be even stronger when it comes to generating negative paranormal effects and fears of being considered 'weird'.

Interestingly, Darren Ritson notes a popular idea that poltergeists may 'feed' on fear – the poltergeist gets off on upsetting you – and so investigators who have their sang froid disturbed by witnessing manifestations might carry the alarm with them.

However, knowing both the researchers in the South Shields case, I would call them persons of reasonable firmness, and not likely to take to their heels and run at the first sign of trouble. Of course, the subconscious mind might react very differently. However, it occurs to me that while both Ritson and Hallowell endured some hair-raising and mind-boggling incidents, could dealing with stressed-out family members have also taken a toll, with the researchers absorbing or picking up emotions from them?



LEFT: Parapsychologist Andrija Puharich (and friend) made some bizarre and controversial claims about the phenomena surrounding Uri Geller.

parapsychology after concluding electromagnetism could not explain psi – see his sceptical recanting in *Science and the Supernatural*, 1980.

The most controversial witness to the 'Geller effect' was parapsychologist Andrija Puharich. Previously respected for his book *Beyond Telepathy* (1962), he fell from grace with his frank accounts of even weirder incidents surrounding Geller. These included dematerialisations, apports and teleportations described in his book *Uri* (1974), and attributed to aliens. His claims were widely derided by critics, who ranked Puharich's book with the wildest science fiction for promoting the idea that an alien intelligence lay behind it all. But Puharich might have been truthful when describing some strange incidents, and the notion of the alien intelligence is not far removed from the arch-poltergeist hypothesis. Ongoing effects were also reported around psychic Matthew Manning, who was the centre of a poltergeist outbreak aged 15, in 1971.

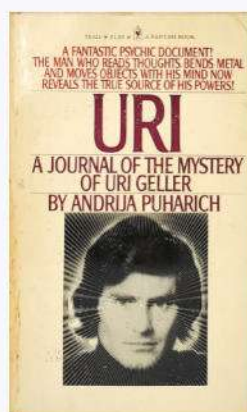
It might be said Home, Geller and Manning all rated as exceptional psychics. However, I think we should avoid automatically assuming that paranormal abilities are necessarily exceptional or typically negative. Is it our narrow perception of day-to-day consciousness that limits our comprehension and prevents us from appreciating what we are capable of achieving through our own mind-power? As Colin Wilson used to remark: "We are grandfather clocks driven by watch-springs." Our own minds, alone or in concert, may be capable of astonishing things, and paranormal gifts could be far more widespread among the population than realised.

I wonder what the answers to Dr McCue's survey might have been if he had enquired specifically about unusual coincidences? I suspect it might have yielded a lot of interesting answers, even if interpretations would still vary widely. In the realm of psychical research, very little can be ruled inadmissible.

Yet this too seems unlikely; why are there not more poltergeists around people who have stressful jobs and professions spent dealing or empathising with others?

Accordingly, I still think we should explore the contagion effect as potentially an extension of the living mind.

There are intriguing accounts of how Daniel Home, the greatest physical medium of the Victorian era, could seemingly transfer powers to observers. In the 20th century, Uri Geller seemed to achieve the same. Professor John Hasted, a leading researcher into paranormal metal bending, described how he and his wife suffered psychokinetic effects in their home after a visit by Geller, suggesting an energy was left behind (John Hasted, *The Metal Benders*, 1981). In his book *Superminds* (1975), Professor John Taylor suggested Geller's talents were perhaps sufficiently electromagnetic to be conducted through broadcasting systems and transmissible into the homes of people watching him live on TV, some of whom reported bending cutlery or broken watches miraculously starting again. Taylor later quit





STRANGE CONTINENT | ULRICH MAGIN looks back at a summer of weird weather, animal attacks and 'lions' on the loose

ANIMAL ATTACKS

We all know that mankind has been hard at work destroying our planet, but nature is increasingly fighting back. Just a few examples:

Andreas Kieling, a German filmmaker well known for his animal documentaries, was attacked and severely injured by a brown bear while filming dippers and woodpeckers in Romania's Carpathian Mountains early in May 2023. "I instinctively pulled up my tripod and rammed it into the bear's mouth," he said, "but by then I was already on the ground with the bear above me. I will never forget it. It was extremely painful – he scalped me." Kieling was able to save his scalp, which was later sewn back on by a surgeon. Kieling also suffered wounds to his arms and face. However, he does not blame the bear, although he says he does not know why it attacked. "There are a thousand possibilities. Maybe it was a female bear with cubs. The mating season has started; the males' hormones are surging," *sur3.de*, 16 May 2023.

The number of dangerous bear encounters rose this summer. In April, the female bear 'JJ4' attacked and killed a 26-year-old jogger near Caldes in Trentino, northern Italy. Then, two attacks were reported from Slovakia. On 14 July in the north of the country, near Sucany, another female bear approached a hiker, who drew his gun and shot two times into the air. As the bear continued to advance, he shot her. The following day, a bear surprised a jogger at Liptovský Hradok and attacked him. The man just managed to reach a road, was discovered by a bus driver and brought to a hospital where he was treated for bite wounds on his arms. In another attack near Krupina, a forestry worker shot at a bear. *merkur.de*, 21 Apr; *taz.de*, 16 Jul 2023.



LEFT: The photo that started the Berlin lion flap in fact showed a boar. BELOW LEFT: The Finkenpark lion turned out to be a cuddly toy.

In Spain, orca attacks continued. In June, they attacked several yachts taking part in the Ocean Race, and in mid-August further attacks were reported on the rudders of a ship close to Gibraltar. This time, sailors shot at the animals to defend themselves. An expert interviewed on the German TV station NTV on 21 August said the whales just wanted to play. *Der Spiegel online*, 23 Jun 2023.

Meanwhile, in Alicante Province, southern Spain, more than 15 bathers were attacked by rather smaller fish: saddled seabream. At Poniente Beach, a tourist spot in Benidorm, the "piranha-like" fish, as the press called them, were biting bathers over the summer, 15 of whom had to receive first aid after being attacked. The 30cm (1ft) long fish prefer warts, moles and small wounds, mainly in older people, which they bite with their sharp teeth, often leaving far larger wounds on their victim. Researchers blame global warming leading to previously unknown behaviour

Early television reports said that officials heard a lion's roar

in fish. *t-online.de*, 5 Sep 2023.

We've had the land and the sea – now for the air. In Dinkelsbühl, Franconia, Germany, a bird of prey was attacking people. A 49-year-old cyclist was thrown from his bike on 17 July by, as the police report says, "a large animal, presumably a raptor", and was severely wounded. The species of bird could not be identified. *web.de*, 19 Jul 2023.

BERLIN LION HUNT

In July 2023, Germany was gripped by lion fever. Police and fire fighters had been witnesses, the roaring of the lion was caught on tape, and a good photo of the lion's back was taken. The Berlin lion hunt was the major news story in

Germany for several days.

Early on 20 July, police started a large scale operation to track a lion between Berlin and Potsdam, a few kilometres to the west of Germany's capital. The day before, at around midnight, a motorist had seen and filmed what was believed to be a lioness hunting a boar at Kleinmachnow. Police alerted the populace, although no lion was reported missing from any zoo, circus, animal shelter or animal park. The search operated with drones and helicopters and thermal cameras, with veterinarians and hunters also taking part. Officials asked people in the region not to leave their homes and to keep pets indoors. In the afternoon, Kleinmachnow's mayor called a press conference, saying no trace of the animal had come to light, but the situation continued to be serious. Police explained that several officers had spotted the lioness in the night, but that so far no blood, faeces or dead prey had been found. However, hairs supposed to be from the lioness were found on a tree at Kleinmachnow. The sightings then shifted to Berlin-Steglitz: the lion was now in the metropolis. There were early television reports that officials had also heard a lion roar.

Then the alarm was called off. Although the hairs had yet to be identified (they were later shown to have been from a wild boar), the photo was conclusively identified as showing a boar – something the German website of the Network for Cryptozoology had already pointed out a day before. The lion's roar, it was revealed, had been played by tricksters from a smart phone. There had been "several dozen sightings",



mainly by police, and the whole hunt had cost thousands of euros.

It was not the first (or the last) such flap in the city. In 2000, a lion, never found, was spotted several times in Berlin and the surrounding countryside. In 2002, a tiger escaped from a circus at Babelsberg, but was caught. In 2020, big cat sightings in Berlin-Schönefeld were resolved when the animal was identified as an ordinary house cat.

A week after the latest lion panic, on 1 August at 6.45 pm, a man walking in Berlin-Dahlem (the quarter bordering Kleinmachnow) spotted and photographed another big cat in the Finkenpark. He alerted police – who arrived and retrieved a soft toy in the form of a panther. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 21+22+23 Jul; *tagesspiegel.de*, 2 Aug 2023.

FREAK WEATHER

In FT's earlier days I used to collect weather extremes, but they are now so common as to be hardly noteworthy except for those whose lives they ruin. At the moment, a day-by-day review of weather extremes on the Continent would fill a whole issue – and that only for the last two months. Here are just some of the examples:

On 4 August, hail poured down on Reutlingen in Germany until it covered the streets to a depth of several inches and had to be removed with snow ploughs! Days later, storms and heavy rains hit Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia, flooding large expanses of land. This was followed by floods in Sweden. In mid-August, hailstones the size of golf balls hit Bavaria, smashing windows in houses and cars and damaging roofs. Two weeks later, another hail storm over Bayersoien, Bavaria, saw stones of 8cm (3in) in diameter smashing car windows and cratering the bodywork. About



LEFT: What appeared to be cobwebs of ectoplasm inside a former German beer cellar.

80 per cent of the homes in the area were damaged, and six people severely injured. The same day, there were storms and floods in Slovenia. Venice had to close the flood gates. In northern Italy, flash floods washed away whole villages in Sondrio.

In Scheveningen, the Netherlands, the beach will be closed from September until December to replace 700,000 cubic metres of sand washed away in bad weather, drastically reducing the 4km (2.5 miles) long and 110m (360ft) wide beach. Rains and floods in Spain followed, in Madrid, Andalusia, and Catalonia. In Alcanar, the mayor asked people not to leave their homes because of the severe danger.

It was not only floods, but heat as well. The second half of August saw the largest forest fires ever registered in Greece, north of Alexandroupolis near the border with Turkey. They were finally brought under control in early September, but were immediately followed by heavy showers that proved equally disastrous. Heavy rain and floods hit Bulgaria, Greece, and western Turkey, on 5 September. The rains were strong enough to create a new lake in central Greece, leaving the towns of Volos and Larisa

under water. According to press reports, the region's agriculture was largely destroyed, and it will be at least five years until the fields can be used again. The roads and railway lines between Athens and Thessaloniki were flooded and unusable for 180km (112 miles). Roads in Bulgaria were completely washed away, while water gushed through the streets of Istanbul in Turkey. *web.de*, 5+16+29 Aug; *welt.de*, *ntv*, 28 Aug, 6 Sept; *Zeit.de*, 3 Sept; *tagesschau.de*, 4 Sept; *heute journal*, 6 Sept 2023.

PARTY OR CONSPIRACY?

When a houseboat capsized on 28 May 2023 in a thunder storm on Lake Maggiore, Italy, and quickly sank, it looked like a straightforward tragedy. The boat, with a maximum permitted number of 15, was crowded with 23 visitors. 19 people managed to reach dry land, but four were feared trapped and drowned, and their bodies were later recovered. The district attorney in Busto Arsizio initiated a preliminary investigation into negligent homicide. However, it soon became obvious that the people on board had been no ordinary holidaymakers. 14 are said to have been members of Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, while

the rest were said to belong to several Italian secret services. Officially, there was no list of the saved and the drowned. However, it was learned that among the victims was the 50-year-old wife of the captain, a Russian, and a pensioned Israeli Mossad agent named Erez Shimoni. The other two dead were both of Italian nationality. Those who survived, for the most part, could not be traced. The boat had officially been chartered for a birthday party, but Italian media soon suspected conspiracy. Trying to get more information, the daily *Corriere della Sera* said it had hit "a wall of silence". Officials planned to salvage the boat to learn more. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 3 June 2023.

ECTOPLASM OR BREATH?

I finish with an odd experience of my own. On 10 September I visited a mid-19th century beer cellar normally closed to the public. The cellar, some 70m (230ft) long and formed like a half-cylinder, was hewn into the living rock and ends at a well inside the mountain. In WWII, it was used as an air-raid-shelter. There was no light other than what came in through the small door and I took flash photographs without being able to see where I was. Bizarrely, on about a dozen of the 20 or so photos I took, strange white cobwebs swirl through the dark room like ectoplasm.

I consulted Hans-Werner Peiniger of the German UFO study group GEP, who suggested I had simply taken pictures of my own breath – it was very hot outside (some 32°C) and very cold inside (perhaps around 5°C). As it was pitch dark, I naturally couldn't see my own condensed breath. I think this explanation holds, but still find the images spooky!



KARL SHUKER ponders a mysterious golden orb and greets an unexpected canine hybrid

THE CRYPTID THAT LAID THE GOLDEN EGG?

On 30 August 2023, a remotely-operated vehicle (ROV) run by the Seascope Alaska 5 expedition, launched by the USA's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), plucked from a seamount two miles deep in the Pacific Ocean's Gulf of Alaska a most extraordinary object. After being brought to the surface, the object was swiftly preserved in alcohol aboard the research vessel *Okeanos Explorer*, before being examined indirectly via video by some very baffled scientists – as well they might be. Dome-shaped, and about 4in (10cm) inches wide, with a small hole at its base and originally attached to a rock, it looked for all the world like a golden egg. And indeed, although scientific opinion a month later remains divided as to what this mysterious orb actually is, a bona fide egg is one identity favoured by several researchers. Moreover, the fact that it has a hole in it indicates that if it is truly an egg, whatever creature it originally housed may well have exited before the ROV recovered it. However, no previously confirmed egg resembling this object has ever been recorded. Other identities suggested include some hitherto-unseen species of deep-sea sponge, or a coral, or even a barnacle. Once the expedition is complete, all of the specimens collected by it, including this enigmatic egg or egg-like object, will be shipped to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC where researchers can begin examining them directly. Perhaps via analyses of DNA samples extracted from its tissues the true nature of this anomalous golden sphere will be revealed, even though, if it is indeed an egg, its mysterious occupant is seemingly long gone and therefore destined to remain cryptic – and also very possibly a cryptid.

www.livescience.com/planet-earth/rivers-oceans/team-egg-or-team-sponge-scientists-divided-over-identity-of-mysterious-golden-orb-from-bottom-of-ocean 13 Sept 2023; www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/sep/07/mysterious-skin-like-golden-orb-found-on-ocean-floor-off-alaska-coast

DOGXIM IS A DOOZY!

Back in 2021, an odd-looking female dog was hit by a car in Vacaria, a city in Rio Grande do Sul, southern Brazil. Because she had survived the collision she was taken to a local vet, where she was successfully treated. In November 2021, she was then transferred to and



ABOVE LEFT: The mysterious golden orb recovered from two miles beneath the ocean – could it be an egg? ABOVE RIGHT: Dogxim receives some TLC at the Mantenedouro São Braz animal facility.

cared for afterwards at the state-run animal facility Mantenedouro São Braz, where she lived until March 2023, dying of unknown causes that are currently under state investigation, according to an official statement by SEMA, Brazil's Secretariat for the Environment and Infrastructure. Due to her peculiar appearance, scientists performed some genetic and cytogenetic tests upon her during her recovery in a bid to discover her precise zoological identity – and when the results came in, they were nothing if not startling.

As revealed when they were published in August 2023, the creature proved to be a hybrid (which may provide an answer for her unexplained death), but no ordinary one. Instead, she was the first-ever scientifically confirmed crossbreed of a domestic dog *Canis (lupus) familiaris* (her father's taxonomic identity) and a pampas fox *Lycalopex gymnocercus* (her mother's taxonomic identity). For whereas her paternal species possesses 78 chromosomes and her maternal species possesses 74, she was found to possess 76, midway between those of her two parental species, and her nuclear DNA contained elements from both species. Her interspecific – indeed, intergeneric – genetic and cytogenetic nature was mirrored by her composite outward morphology as well as by her behaviour, combining distinctly large, pointed foxy ears with a long dog-like muzzle and thick black hair, plus a fondness for

playing with toys like a dog and barking like one too, but moving and climbing bushes like a Pampas fox. Accordingly, she was dubbed 'Dogxim' (with this name also being used as a term for her specific hybrid type; it derives from 'dog', combined with a much-contracted 'graxaim do campo', the Portuguese for pampas fox). Moreover, the general media have consistently claimed that she is the first recorded example of a dog x fox hybrid – but this is not technically true. For despite its vernacular name and looking superficially fox-like, the Pampas fox is not a true fox, i.e. belonging to the genus *Vulpes*; as yet, there is still no scientifically confirmed hybrid of a *Canis* species and a *Vulpes* species. Instead, the Pampas fox belongs to an exclusively South American genus, *Lycalopex*, containing several species, which tend to be referred to scientifically as zorros in order to distinguish them verbally from true, *Vulpes* foxes, because zorros are actually more closely related to *Canis* species than they are to *Vulpes* ones – thereby helping to explain how such a hybrid could have resulted. Even so, the two genera, *Canis* and *Lycalopex*, have been evolutionarily separate for several million years, meaning that Dogxim is still a doozy – a truly exceptional, hitherto entirely unexpected entity of the canine kind.

www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/dogxim-first-dog-fox-hybrid; www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/13/15/2505

THE C⁺NSPIRASPHERE

As the fog of war descends once again in the Middle East, **NOEL ROONEY** sees any attempts to get to the truth hampered by propaganda, partisan opinions and evidence-free theories

WARS AND RUMOURS OF WARS

The eruption of fresh hostilities between Hamas and Israel has revealed deep divisions in the Conspirasphere. It's as if war has broken out on multiple fronts, some of them ethereal. Some groups are fervently pro-Israel, some equally fervently anti. So much so that they have effectively obscured the classic, grand narrative and narrowed the vicarious conflict to a 'with or against' duality that reminds one of the aftermath of 9/11.

There is very little doubt that anti-Semitism plays a part in this new farrago; and little doubt that accusations of anti-Semitism are being used as weapons. The miasma that inevitably follows sudden and dramatically violent events makes any attempt at distinguishing between the two very difficult. This is particularly true in the context of Israel, where there are many people who do not see themselves as anti-Semitic but do see themselves as anti-Zionist.

A further layer of unreality adds to the confusion. The Hamas raid was, it seems to me, an act of war; since a majority of the world's population (if polls from various countries have got the truth of it) sees Palestine as a legitimate state, and Hamas as the government of that state, it must be so. Ergo, Israel's declaration of war on Hamas is, for those who support it, perfectly legitimate. But very few observers seem to acknowledge all this; so the apparent reality is permanently lopsided.

Facts are both indifferent to opinion and unnecessary for it. Stories are the food of war, and some stories are perennials; the reports that Hamas had intentionally murdered 40 babies, beheading some of them, represent a tragically apt example. Students of history



People are inclined to believe rather than question

will be aware that similar stories have surfaced at the outset of many wars: the first Iraq war and World War I are prime cases.

I am quite certain that children and infants were among the victims of both the Hamas attack and the Israeli response; the technology of modern warfare, and the actions of terrified combatants (and no doubt the occasional psychopath), make it inevitable. But I strongly doubt that either side intentionally targets infants; it would simply not be in their long-term interests to do so. Nonetheless, stories of this kind are the engines of not just opinions but also theories; it's as if we all lose our memories when new conflicts arise, and there are those – within the C-sphere and without – that exploit such collective lapses.

The C-sphere is obviously not immune to propaganda. And when events move at such terrifying speed, there is little time for the more diligent

conspiracists to dig through the layers and uncover something approximating to truth. So the knee-jerk responses are the first and loudest signals that adherents and observers see and hear. And that, more often than not, becomes the permanent ground of their claims and counter-claims.

At the time of writing, the initial attack is a week or

so past. I am just beginning to see more considered appraisals of the conflict from a conspiracist point of view; and I get the sad feeling that much of their potential audience is already committed to one side or the other, which is to say uninterested in objective analysis, and equally uninterested in conspiracy theories that place the conflict in broader terms. Those facts that can be ascertained (and there are precious few) are consigned, like so many facts are in our benighted age, to the category of things that used to be true. Opinion rules; and the more outrageous the opinion, the more it registers on the partisan Richter scale.

I am reluctant to repeat the more extreme theories and claims I've seen in the alternative media and the C-sphere; they are ugly, and evidence-free, on both sides. But they do, perhaps, illuminate a peculiar aspect of conspiracy theory; even at its barmiest or most vituperative, it holds a kind of mirror up to society as a whole. Partisan blinkers limit objectivity in much of the media, and people are inclined to believe rather than question; the conspiracists may exhibit a difference of degree in this, but not, I would argue, of kind.

LEFT: A missile explodes in Gaza City on 8 October.

In the C-sphere, images have been posted that turn out to be from other times, other conflicts; in some cases, the same has happened in the mainstream media. In the C-sphere, the (now quasi-mythical) events of 9/11 are seen by some as a template for the current war; that putative resemblance has been mentioned in the mainstream too. In the C-sphere, the dead babies story was taken as automatic gospel by some, and used as fuel for the fire; in the mainstream, the odd unscrupulous commentator has done the same.

What are we to make of a world where the output of the margins and the centre begin to resemble each other, even as they continue to dismiss each other? I have written in the past about how conspiracy theory has migrated from the margins to the mainstream, first as exotica, then as an object of ridicule, and then, perhaps, as a utility vehicle. I would hesitate to say that the mainstream is, in some manner, making the return journey, but looking at the sometimes bizarre claims in media outlets on all sides, one can see why some commentators think this is the case.

Have conspiracy theorists hardened attitudes and added to the confusion around an already horribly confusing situation? Undoubtedly; it would be reckless to deny it. Have the alternative media, now read by as many people as mainstream media, made any real effort at objectivity? For the most part, no. Have the mainstream media clarified things for the confused? I am not entirely sure they have.

So we dream and suffer, and the world turns sour.

THEY DO LIKE IT UP 'EM 3 | Will they never learn? Startling numbers of people continue to put inappropriate things in daft places

ANAL RAIL GUN

A slightly dubious story that circulated on social media in May included an image that showed a butt plug in a position in someone's body where no butt plug should reasonably be found. The accompanying story claimed that it came from an unnamed "Valley attorney", presumably meaning the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles, whose client was suing a sex toy company. It seems that the client had bought a butt plug that was advertised as "100% silicone" and had worn it to an MRI scan, during which patients are supposed to remove everything metal, assuming it would be safe. However, the plug actually contained a steel core, with the result that the magnetic field of the scanner created what is memorably described as an "anal rail gun". This accelerated the plug rapidly causing it to tear itself out of the client's lower intestine, rip its way through their body and end up in their chest cavity. The client, apparently, survived the experience, although with major life-threatening injuries that necessitated a lengthy stay in hospital and now wants damages from the plug manufacturer for misdescribing the item. *ifscience.com*, 11 May 2023.

LIGHTBULB MOMENT

Firefighters at the Yuyao City Fire and Rescue Brigade, in Zhejiang, China, were initially baffled when a man referred to only as Mr Chen burst into their station with his mouth covered with a T-shirt and tried to tell them something urgently, which they could not understand as he only seemed able to make incoherent muffled sounds. Once they persuaded him to remove the T-shirt, they were able to understand his problem; he had an LED lightbulb jammed in his mouth, with just the screw fitting sticking out, and needed help removing it.



ABOVE LEFT: The unlikely journey of a butt plug in a picture that has done the rounds online. TOP RIGHT: The thermometer inserted into his urethra by a 12-year-old boy. ABOVE RIGHT: Mr Chen and his lightbulb.

After inspection, the firefighters decided that it was too risky for them to try and pull the bulb out as it could shatter and seriously injure Chen's mouth, so they took him to the nearby Yuyao People's Hospital. There, doctors used a device to dislocate Chen's jaw on one side, allowing them to ease the lightbulb past his teeth and out of his mouth. Asked about how he had ended up in this predicament, Chen admitted that two hours before he arrived at the fire station, he had seen someone in an online video put an entire lightbulb in their mouth and wanted to see if he could manage it himself, but when it came to getting the bulb out, found that he couldn't get it past his teeth and had trouble speaking and swallowing; at this point he sought professional help. *odditycentral.com*, 31 Jul 2023.

MERCURY RISING

In Chengdu, China, a 12-year-old boy inserted a thermometer into his penis while masturbating, then found he was unable to remove it. He put up with excruciating pain for nine hours before admitting what he'd done and being taken to hospital. There, X-rays showed that the item had by then worked its way up the urinary tract and entered the boy's bladder, risking perforation. As a result, rather than pulling it back out the way it came, doctors decided to carry out keyhole surgery to extract the thermometer, successfully removing it without causing any more damage. *metro.co.uk*, 7 Jan 2023.

FORE!

A 14-year-old boy in Australia ended up in hospital after he put a golf ball in his anus, then

panicked when he couldn't get it out by defecating. Although he was not in any discomfort, he was rushed to the Royal Adelaide Hospital, where doctors attempted to snare the ball with a whole variety of devices – a suction cup, medical net, looped snare, quad-prong grasper, retrieval pouch and a balloon catheter. After doing this for two hours, they stopped "aggressive" interventions in the hope that the golf ball would "spontaneously enter the rectum". It didn't, and stubbornly remained lodged further up the patient's intestine 24 hours later. As a result, doctors gave the boy a litre of laxatives, and three hours later reported a "successful evacuation" of the golf ball with "no evidence of bowel injury". They advised the boy "against inserting further objects into

his rectum in the future” and in their report noted that: “A golf ball presents unique technical challenges when attempting to remove from the colon due to its mechanical properties. These include its large size, spherical shape, incompressibility, and the presence of dimples, which prevents a suction seal.” *nypost.com*, 1 Feb 2023.

PENIS STRANGLER

The *Asian Journal of Surgery* published a paper in January that detailed a particularly horrifying case of penile strangulation. A 72-year-old man from Changsa, China, turned up at hospital suffering from “intense pain” in his penis, having inserted it into a 2cm-thick metal ring six months earlier and then been unable to remove it, leaving it stuck around the base of his member. Doctors found that his penis was significantly swollen and that there were visible ulcers on the skin around the ring, although the man did not seem to have any problem urinating. Initial attempts to remove the ring with medical equipment failed, so doctors brought in the fire brigade, who tackled

it with a heavy wire cutter. This, too, failed to shift the problem, so they resorted to cutting through the ring with a circular saw, spraying the man’s penis with water to cool it, as sawing through metal generates considerable heat that could have inflicted serious burns. Unfortunately, it was too late to save the entire penis, as lack of blood flow had left dead tissue at its root, which doctors removed, stitching up the wound. They also made three incisions in the organ to place a “drainage strip” across it to reduce the swelling. After a seven-day stay in hospital, the swelling had “subsided significantly” and the man was sent home with antibiotics. Penile strangulation was first documented in medical literature in 1755; surprisingly, it has rarely been reported since, with less than 100 cases on record. Doctors warned that early treatment is important in cases of penile strangulation, as leaving the strangling item in place can cause severe complications and may lead to amputation. *dailymail.co.uk*, 20 Jan 2023.

For previous instalments, see FT419:6-7 and 427:6-7.

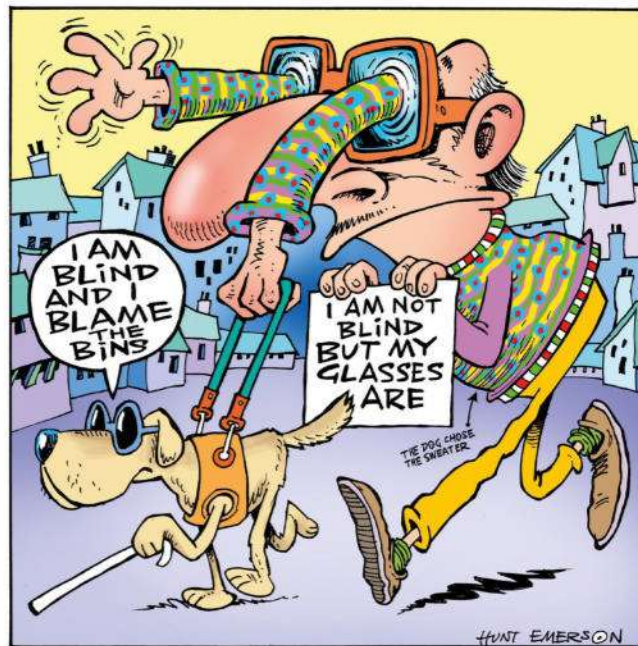


ABOVE: Hole in one! An Australian teenager put a golf ball in his anus; it ended up lodged stubbornly in his intestine.

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

273: YOU CAN'T TAKE THEM OFF



The myth

If you wear your spectacles when you don't actually need them, your eyes will become dependent on them as the eye muscles atrophy – so in the end you will have to wear them all the time.

The “truth”

Bet this sounds familiar to many: when I started wearing specs, aged 12, I only needed them for looking at the blackboard (not something I did very often anyway) and watching TV. I soon learned, however, that if I carried my glasses around in my trouser pockets they would fall out and get lost several times a day. The solution: wear them permanently. And that was when countless teachers and other concerned adults introduced me to this belief which, polling says, is still widespread. While there seems to have been little specific research in this area, optometrists are unequivocal: wearing glasses cannot weaken your eyesight under any circumstances, or cause dependency. Impressions to the contrary likely arise because your eyesight is getting worse anyway, and you remember that before you started wearing specs it was better. Which of course it was. Plus, wearing bins all the time means that you become used to seeing properly, so when you do remove them you are much more aware of the fog and blur.

Sources

www.bbc.com/future/article/20140513-do-glasses-weaken-your-eyesight; www.specsavers.com.au/help-and-faqs/can-i-wear-glasses-all-the-time; www.aao.org/eye-health/tips-prevention/common-eye-vision-myths-facts; www.popsci.com/do-glasses-make-vision-work/

Update

The latest splash (www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-63755475) around the “eight glasses of water a day” myth (see FT178:28, 262:15, 270:17, 369:25) confirms that the original error lay in not taking into account the water we eat in food as well as the water we drink. But it adds an amusing detail: recent researchers have estimated how much food people eat by asking them. Unfortunately, those surveyed consistently under-report that amount, thus causing scientists to significantly overestimate the water that needs to be taken in liquid form.

NECROLOG

This month, one of the world's most famous alien abductees beams up for the last time, and we say goodbye to an old school conspiracy theorist and UnCon guest

CALVIN PARKER

On the evening of 11 October 1973, the then 19-year-old Calvin Parker had the experience that would come to dominate the rest of his life. Along with his work colleague Charles Hickson, he was fishing from a pier near Ingalls Shipyard on the Pascagoula River in Mississippi when he spotted blue lights reflecting from the water. Thinking it was police coming to evict them from the pier, he looked up to see a strange craft hovering over them, making a hissing sound. It was, he said, “football shaped” (US style, so like a rugby ball), about 80ft (24.3m) long and had a blinding light coming from it. Parker said that he and Hickson were then drawn up into the craft where they encountered three aliens with pale, wrinkled skin. They had no eyes that the men could discern, instead, there were three “carrot-like” growths – one where the nose would be on a human, the other two where ears would normally be. They also had “robotic slit-mouths” and “crab-like pincers”. Their heads appeared connected directly to their shoulders, with no visible neck, and they seemed to have only one leg ending in an elephant-like foot. Hickson reported that the creatures moved in a mechanical, robotic way. The entities subjected Hickson and Parker to an examination with something resembling a giant eye before returning them to the riverbank after about 30 minutes, with small puncture injuries still visible on their bodies. The pair initially tried to report their encounter to nearby Keesler Air Force Base, but the military directed them to the Jackson County Sheriff's Office. “We did everything we knew to try to break their stories,” said Jackson County Sheriff's Captain Glen Ryder in 1975. “If they were lying to me, they should be in Hollywood.”



LEFT: Calvin Parker in 2019.

After they reported their experience to the police, it made headlines around the world, but while Hickson embraced the attention, Parker was rather more reserved about it, finding the ridicule the pair received difficult to handle. He initially eschewed the spotlight to the extent that he would change jobs and move from town to town when people found out who he was. Eventually, at the urging of his wife Waynette, Parker wrote a book (Hickson having already done so in 1983), *Pascagoula: The Closest Encounter*, published in 2018. “I felt like everyone deserved an explanation,” Parker said. “Everyone has an expiration date and I wanted to get this out there before I die.” Hickson had passed away in 2010, aged 80.

Parker's book prompted a third witness to their experience to come forward. By 2018, the atmosphere of ridicule had receded, so after having kept quiet for 45 years, Maria Blair went public with her story, partially corroborating Parker and Hickson's experience. Back in October 1973, on the night of Parker and Hickson's encounter, Blair was also near the river, waiting for her

husband, Jerry, to leave on a boat to work offshore. After her husband fell asleep, Maria saw a strange, blue light streaking back and forth over the water, and, after hearing reports of the abduction, she realised that she, too, had seen the ship. Prompted by Blair's testimony, Parker published a follow up book in 2021, *Pascagoula: The Story Continues: New Evidence & New Witnesses*. Also, in 2019, the Jackson County Historical Society erected a historical marker at Lighthouse Park near where the abduction took place that describes the events of that night, calling it America's “best documented case of alien abduction”. The city now celebrates the incident with an annual alien festival in October. Shortly before his death, Parker said that while he'd spent much of his life trying to avoid association with his abduction, in hindsight, his life was better for it in a way. “Under the circumstances now, I'm kind of glad it did happen, because I got to meet a lot of people I wouldn't have gotten to meet,” he said.

Calvin Parker, UFO abductee; born Laurel, Mississippi, 2 Nov 1954; died Moss Point, Mississippi, 24 Aug 2023, age 68.

KENN THOMAS

Kenn Thomas, who has died at 65, was central to an older, kinder, and more rational conspiracy culture, libertarian, left leaning and with its roots in the 1960s counterculture. Along with Robin Ramsay's *Lobster* in the UK, Thomas' magazine *Steamshovel* was at the heart of this. Thomas and his writers, who included Jim Keith, Adam Parfrey and Skytaire Alfvegren, relied on evidence collection, investigative journalism and critical analysis to support their claims. They took an approach that was suspicious of government and power and dug deep to reveal the sordid conspiratorial machinations of the real elites.

Thomas called his research interest “parapolitics”, the study of conspiracies of all colours – from alien abductions and the Illuminati to the John F Kennedy assassination and the 9/11 attacks. The *New Yorker* called his work “on the cutting edge” of conspiracy.

Dogged by ill health, he semi-retired in 2016, resisting any temptation to boost his profile by jumping on the right-wing conspiracy bandwagon, saying: “Friends died, social media took over the online discussion, in-person conspiracy conference organisers folded their tents, many small publishers and the zine scene went the way of the dinosaur.” This did not prevent him casting a knowledgeable eye over the Trump-related conspiracy circus in his book *Trumpocalypse Now*.

Thomas travelled extensively during the 1980s and 1990s to speak about his conspiracy and fortaean interests and was a guest at FT's UnConvention. He supported these activities with employment as an archivist for the University of Missouri, working there for almost 40



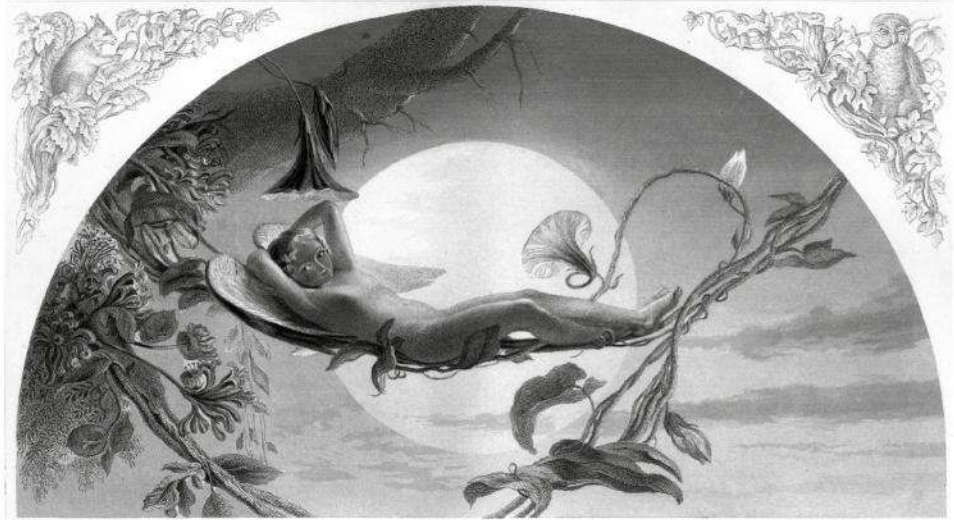
years before retiring in 2019. He had started out as a newspaper journalist and rock critic, founding *Steamshovel* as an outlet for writing he couldn't get published elsewhere, saying, "I began to notice, however, that the more I wrote about things that interested me, the less I had to say in the mainstream forum... By the time of the third issue... conspiracy culture seemed waning. This happened in the late 1980s: factional fighting beset Mae Brussell's admirers; Oliver Stone's *JFK* movie and that damned *X-Files* show were well into the future; even the impact of the Internet had not yet been felt fully. In a panic, I published a call for papers on conspiracy topics for publication in the following issue." This proved a success and set the magazine on its future path. Thomas still maintained a counterculture element, running pieces on Timothy Leary, Neal Cassady and the Beats, and maintaining friendships with Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs.

Thomas wrote over a dozen books on conspiracy topics, including *NASA, Nazis & JFK*, and *Maury Island UFO*, about the possibility that Fred Crisman was connected to the JFK assassination. With Jim Keith he co-wrote *The Octopus: Secret Government and the Death of Danny Casolaro*, about the Inslaw affair, which involved dark dealings between the US intelligence community and a software developer during the George W Bush administration.

Despite multiple health problems, Thomas resisted going into a nursing home because it would have meant living without his books, records and comics, which to him was not living at all, and spent his final years supported by friends and family. He passed away in hospital where he was receiving dialysis for his kidney problems.

Kenneth Francis Thomas, editor, writer and conspiracy expert; born St Louis, 12 June 1958; died St Louis, 22 September 2023, aged 65.

Loren Coleman & Ian Simmons



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

WHITHER FORTEANA?

Happy Birthday, *Fortean Times*! I have the great pleasure to celebrate, in these pages, the anniversary of by far the most significant anomalist publication of the past half century. William Corliss, Jacques Vallée and, yes, even the spiritual founder, Charles Fort doff their caps as *FT* struts by.

Once the cake is cut and the champagne bottles emptied, though, I also find myself wondering about the progress of the five decades past and where we will likely be in 50 years. Forteanians have proved themselves in the last generation remarkable archivists: they have used the digital revolution to hunt down the most obscure bits of print about the most extraordinary events. Here they have followed in Fort's sometimes faltering footsteps and done far better than many humanities departments (a number of which have turned from the search for knowledge to the search for ideological conformity). The result is that those fascinated by anomalies have much larger datasets than we did in the early 1970s. But do we actually know anything more? The alien master race never turned up on the steps of the UN. Nessie is still hiding at the bottom of her Loch. The breakthroughs in parapsychology proved illusory or difficult to interpret: before the letters pour in, I acknowledge that there is suggestive material! Will any of these things

shake out by 2073? I'm doubtful. The fairies (and every other form of the impossible) will, while continuing to change their forms, elude the butterfly net, never mind how fine the mesh. But, my predictions continue, forteana will be of greater interest than ever. The AI revolution is already upon us and it is, make no mistake, a revolution: perhaps

any survivors will later decide, a catastrophe. I find it humbling that ChatGPT 4 already performs several of my highest functions better than I do and in a fraction of the time. In a world where AI will soon outperform humans in reason – and (don't kid yourselves) creativity-based tasks – then the mysterious, the unknown, the spiritual will become a uniquely human field. Dave had 'stars': Hal 9000 his nuts-and-bolts mission. The problem is that when humanity dives into the mystic, we almost always

become less tolerant. Mystics just 'know': they don't have to justify or explain. Anomalists (*FT* foremost among them) have adopted a broad-church approach, which has made the field attractive with much bonhomie. As our determination to defend freedom of speech collapses (and it has done just that in the last 10 years) and as new theologies emerge, expect less room for 'opinion diversity'. Happy birthday to *FT*, then, but our world, reader, is coming apart at the seams...

Simon has edited *The Wollaton Gnomes: A Nottingham Fairy Mystery* (Pwca, 2023)

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Hearing the Good News

NIGEL WATSON recalls the UFO scene of the early 1970s and the impact of the proto-*Fortean Times*

I am not sure how I discovered *The News*: *A Miscellany of Fortean Curiosities* back in 1973; perhaps it was a small advert in *Flying Saucer Review (FSR)* or some other UFO publication.

At that time *FSR* was a glossy magazine that took a worldwide view of the subject, with Charles Bowen as its editor and Gordon Creighton as a regular translator of amazing UFO encounters in South America. *FSR* carried many articles by John Keel, who brought a fresh approach to the field that challenged the notion that UFOs were 'nuts and bolts' spacecraft. This annoyed groups like the US National Investigations Committee On Aerial Phenomena (NICAP) that tended to distance themselves from the wilder stories of the contactees.

NICAP focused on proving that UFOs are intelligently controlled craft by studying their flight patterns and characteristics, what they looked like and the physical effects caused by them, such as so-called electromagnetic effects that stopped cars and interfered with radio and TV signals. Photographs, radar data and any physiological effects on witnesses or nearby animals were also worthy of study. Any reports of close encounters with UFOs and their occupants were regarded as borderline contactee stories, which tainted NICAP's goal of gaining scientific recognition for its work.

The 'pure' study of anomalous objects and lights in the sky, along with blaming the US Government for hiding the 'secret' of UFOs, kept NICAP alive, but 1966 saw the first special issue of *FSR*. It was called 'The Humanoids' and subtitled: 'A Survey of Worldwide reports of Landings of Unconventional Aerial Objects and Their Alleged Occupants' – and it opened up a whole new can of worms. Heavyweight ufological contributors included Jacques Vallée, Antonio Ribera, Gordon Creighton, WT Powers, Coral Lorenzen, Donald B Hanlon and Aimé Michel, and its success led to it being expanded and released as a paperback book in December 1974. The inclusion of the Betty and Barney Hill abduction case and Antonio Villas Boas's sexual encounter with a spacewoman opened up the doors to what became familiar elements of ufology by the 1980s.

Another influential publication was the *Merseyside UFO Bulletin (MUFOB, later Magonia)*, which also embraced many of John Keel's ideas. Unlike *FSR*, it was produced in the style of the usual type of UFO newsletter using a mimeograph duplicating machine. Rather than publishing case histories and investigations, *MUFOB* followed a sceptical



psychosociological viewpoint (for more, see **FT45:55, 400:52-53, 428:28-29**).

Numerous publications produced by UFO groups littered the UFO media landscape during this period (many are now archived and can be accessed on the AFU website at: files.afu.se/Downloads/?dir=Magazines/).

In the early 1970s I contributed to the *South Lincs UFO Study Group Newsletter*. As I lived in Scunthorpe, this was one of the nearest groups I knew of and I sent them any UFO-related news clippings and short articles I found.

One notable clipping came from the *Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph* of 25 November 1970, and was reproduced in the Summer edition of the *Newsletter*, No 32. It concerned the aptly named busman Melvyn Batty, who was prompted by his three-year-old son to look up at the sky as they walked along Frodingham Road, Scunthorpe. In the clear sky he saw a wingless, silver, dome-shaped object moving faster than an ordinary aircraft and flying from west to east. On the same day, his seven-year-old daughter claimed she saw a ball moving around in the sky. The newspaper noted that earlier in June, there had been reports of an object that looked slightly smaller than the Moon moving over Scunthorpe.

My grandmother was, I think, one of the witnesses to the Moon-like object, and she was the first UFO witness I ever interviewed – I recall she described it as being orange, but my notes about this have long since disappeared.

Regarding Mr Batty's sighting, it's possible he saw a Vulcan bomber of the type that

LEFT: Scunthorpe lad Nigel Watson, barely out of short trousers by the looks of it, makes an early appearance in the local press.

operated from RAF Scampton. I saw a similar silvery dome-shaped craft on the southern horizon as I was walking along Messingham Road, Scunthorpe. If I had not spotted it earlier flying overhead from the north I could have easily thought it was Mr Batty's UFO on a return trip.

These local sightings spurred so much interest that I helped set up the Scunthorpe UFO Research Society (SUFORS) in May 1972. We held weekly meetings and a few of us interviewed local witnesses. Our ambitious constitution had four aims. Firstly to collect, evaluate and disseminate information on UFOs and allied phenomena. Secondly, to promote open-minded conversation about UFOs. Thirdly, to promote interest locally and internationally and to liaise with other similar organisations. Lastly, To combine conversation with practical fieldwork and skywatches (see **FT413:54-55** for more).

At that time we were lucky to see one documentary about UFOs a year on TV, and UFO news and theories slowly spread through small circulation magazines, books and letters. In our group we had die-hard George Adamski contactee supporters, those who believed in alien spaceships and those of us who followed the idea promoted by Keel that aliens were ultraterrestrial entities who were intimately linked to our haunted planet and were conducting an age-old Operation Trojan Horse.

Having already been a regular news-clipper of anything related to space travel or UFOs, I thought Bob Rickard's *The News* was perfect: now I could also cut out reports of *anything* weird and wonderful, and reduce the daily editions of the *Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph* to Swiss cheese. *The News* opened up a whole new world of phenomena, and once you start looking it is surprising how many and varied unusual events occur on your own doorstep. It introduced the works of Charles Fort and his philosophy of looking beyond the latest fashionable dogma and believing nothing. And, that's not easy as we all love to see patterns and meanings in everything.

Fort was the first to gather reports of mysterious airships seen long before our flying saucer era, and for that alone he can be seen as laying the foundations for ufology.

The News, evolving into the *Fortean Times*, has challenged our perceptions of reality for 50 years – may it long continue into the age of UAPs and non-terrestrial beings.



River of Time

JENNY RANGLES considers recurring connections between rivers, missing time and alien abductions

The sad death of one of the most famous American UFO abductees, Calvin Parker, was announced on 24 August (see obit, p.28 and **FT119:38, 122:52, 382:30**). He and fellow fisherman Charles Hickson had their encounter on the Pascagoula River in Mississippi on 11 October 1973. Both later wrote books about their experience.

When I met Hickson, the older of the two, in 1987, I was surprised by his calmness. He said: "I had to learn to accept what happened." And added: "I saw what happened to a man who could not accept it." He was referring to Parker, who needed lengthy therapy to cope. We should err on the side of caution in assessing what witnesses say happens during such an abduction, but I have met too many honest witnesses like these and know they have had a genuine experience of some kind. Hickson also told me that he was offered lots of money for a movie to be made – "but making money was not what this experience was about."

The local police in Pascagoula shrewdly left the two men alone after they arrived to report their 'kidnap', but secretly bugged the room to record all they said. Both men behaved as if describing a real trauma. Parker was recorded praying to himself, in evident terror. They also both passed lie detector tests in New Orleans. "This son of a bitch is telling the truth," the expert said, clearly having expected the opposite. I saw little cause to doubt that *something* had happened. And it made me think how such close encounters often happen in and around rivers.

Why might that be? Well, of course, if there is an alien component it makes sense. If you hover in the sky, people will see you, and defence forces might be sent to greet you. Likewise, if you land somewhere busy where there are people – rather a necessity if you plan to abduct some, for whatever nefarious reasons. But if your craft is able to go underwater, it would be a convenient way to remain unobserved.

Of course, abductions are rare. But the proximity of water seems to be a persistent theme. Many well-known cases did take place right next to rivers – including two like the Pascagoula encounter.

The widely discussed Alan Godfrey case in Yorkshire in November 1980 is one (see **FT269:44-47, 270:46-49, 325:27, 326:27, 327:29, 328:28-30**). A young policeman on patrol was stopped in his tracks by an object directly over the road ahead leaving



"This son of a bitch is telling the truth," the lie detector expert said

marks on the highway and leading to later hypnotic recall of an on board 'investigation' and medical probe. This event achieved the unique distinction of being mentioned several times in the award-winning BBC drama series *Happy Valley* – set in Calderdale Valley. The River Calder flows next to where Alan's patrol car was stopped by the hovering UFO.

Another abduction case occurred on the banks of the River Mersey in East Didsbury, south Manchester, on 19 August 1979. A mother and her two children, a teenage girl and a boy aged five, were collecting wild flowers in the fields around the meandering river. They scrambled up the steep embankment and saw something 'land' nearby, just above the water meadow, looking like a flying gondola in the evening light. The three of them ran towards the object as it descended on its curved base. The two children later said there was a strange look in their mother's eyes, as if she was being drawn towards it. The next thing they recalled was running back toward the river, away from the UFO. A wind had now come from nowhere (which quickly vanished) and was blowing round them. The sky looked darker too, as the sun was already setting.

On arriving home at their house just off the meadows they were surprised to find their father home from work – and it was now an hour later than they expected. Hence the 'sudden' sunset. The young boy tried to get his father to take him back to see what he called "the crashed boat". But it was now too dark. Over the next few days the mother and the daughter developed strange weals on their legs, which faded after a few more days. The younger boy had no weals, but

LEFT: Artist's impression of the bizarre aliens encountered by abductee Calvin Parker in 1973.

did have vivid nightmares of men with heads "shaped like raindrops" coming for him.

There are multiple cases adjacent to major rivers. I have looked into half a dozen on the bank of the Mersey alone – and that is a relatively short river, running only 40 miles (64km) or so from Stockport to Liverpool, where it enters the sea. What is intriguing about most of these cases is that some kind of suspension of the flow of time is often reported in them. Another extraordinary story I investigated was in 1988 by the Mersey, in Cheadle, involving small dark entities that attacked some young people who were using a rocky area around a small waterfall to practise martial arts with a teacher. They saw misty beings emerge from the bushes and felt pressure on their bodies pushing them away. The stately home built here was owned by the nephew of Agatha Christie and her sister.

At the time of Agatha's infamous 10-day disappearance in 1926 – the whole truth of which has never emerged – her car was found abandoned, miles away, near a beauty spot beside a lake; it was feared she had drowned herself, until she reappeared in Harrogate claiming no memory of what happened (she had registered into a hotel under a false name). Doctors diagnosed her as having traumatic memory loss – which sounds rather like the missing-time syndrome found with abductees. Immediately after being found in Harrogate, Christie went south to Abney Hall. She stayed out of contact there for some time, with the gates locked and telephone disconnected. From then until her death in 1976 she never spoke of the missing-time period. Which is probably why locals suspected she was there all the time.

While the connection here between the world's best-known mystery novelist and the 'phantom ninja dwarf' attack six decades later in the Abney Hall grounds is intriguing, it is entirely circumstantial. However, this did not prevent a 2008 *Doctor Who* episode having David Tennant visit the missing 10 days in Christie's life, in an amusing story called "The Unicorn and the Wasp", in which a giant wasp attack triggers the vanishing – and explains why she never mentioned it. That episode, written by Gareth Roberts, appeared in June 2008 – 20 years exactly after the ninja dwarf attacks by the waterfall began at Abney Hall...

The Poltergeist

Cases of Contagion

As co-investigator of the South Shields poltergeist case, **DARREN W RITSON** experienced some odd events that made him ask whether the poltergeist phenomenon can attach itself to investigators or neighbours – and examples from earlier cases suggested he might be right.

It was summer 2006, and I was sitting in the office of Michael J Hallowell's home in South Tyneside, typing up our case notes and discussing the bewildering chain of events that had occurred that very morning at 42 Lock Street, which was, at that time, the home of the South Shields poltergeist.¹

Suddenly, the urge came over both of us to go and put the kettle on. As we left the office area we passed a bookshelf containing a large number of books; one of these books was a very large hardback – probably weighing at least 4lb – entitled *The Borough of South Shields* by George B Hodgson. As we made our way past the bookshelf, we heard a strange noise followed by a loud thump; we both jumped, turned around and were astonished to see *The Borough of South Shields* on the floor. Somehow, the hefty tome had removed itself from the shelf.

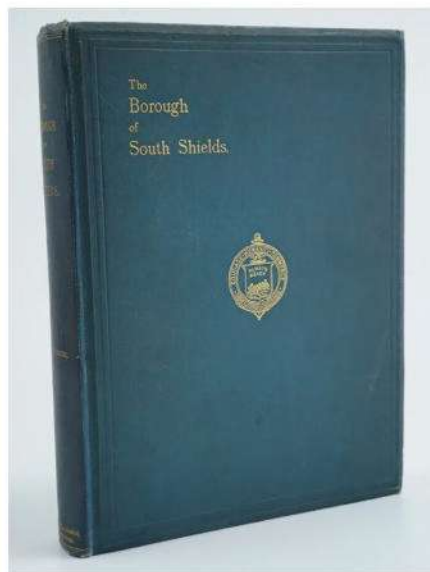
"Do you think we have brought something back with us?" I said to Michael.²

CONTAGIOUS POLTS

It's an interesting question. Can a poltergeist follow you home? Can a poltergeist attach itself to you during an investigation? Can it 'reach out' and infect those that get too close to it? It sounds like a ludicrous notion – closer to a horror movie than real life – but, it happened to Michael and me, and it occurred on more than one occasion during the course of our investigation.

I had first come across the suggestion of the poltergeist being contagious during the 1980s when reading the late Guy Lyon Playfair's book about the Enfield Poltergeist; and again in 1996 in a study by John and Anne Spencer, in which they state: "Where responsiveness leaves and contagion takes over is not always clear, but the evidence is that poltergeists do have an element of contagion attached to them. Those involved find that they 'take a little home with them' after working in poltergeist infested houses."³

However, we can go back to the 1970s to find earlier references to poltergeist contagion. The noted American parapsychologist and author D Scott Rogo wrote in his 1979



LEFT: *The Borough of South Shields* by George B Hodgson; how did this hefty tome come to remove itself from a shelf and appear on the floor?

Can a poltergeist attach itself to you during an investigation?

book *The Poltergeist Experience*: "It is common for the poltergeist to follow its primary victims, who, as I have pointed out before, are probably causing the disturbances to begin with. But on rare occasions a poltergeist will also infest neighbouring houses. Few poltergeist investigators are aware of this fact. Such events cannot be explained by the theory that the poltergeist focus is himself producing the effects. They indicate that the poltergeist is a much more complex phenomenon than many parapsychologists would have us believe."⁴

So, clearly, I wasn't the only person to have noticed this. What puzzled me, though, was why no one had ever written extensively about it. After the South Shields case and the contagion we personally experienced

both during and after our investigation, both Michael and I decided to research the phenomenon. We were surprised at what we eventually discovered, and therefore we wrote what we believed to be the first full examination of poltergeist contagion.⁵ The book also explores the many remarkable parallels between poltergeist cases, including unnerving similarities between the cases we investigated after South Shields, and offers theories as to why so many poltergeists 'do the same things', how contagion *may* be initiated and, more importantly, *why* it might happen. However, before we proceed any further, I should define *what* is meant by contagion, and *who* can be affected.

In a poltergeist case, the focus-person or agent of the alleged poltergeist activity can carry the phenomena from place to place, or to use a more familiar term, be 'followed' by it. Virginia Campbell for example, from the Sauchie poltergeist case of Scotland in 1960 (see FT293:36), went to school for some normality after outbreaks of activity at her Park Crescent home – but the abnormalities occurred at the school too. This included the levitation and movement of a table while she was in class and the rising and falling of her desk lid, much to her consternation. This is *not* contagion at work, because Virginia *was* the 'focus'. Contagion can be identified and labelled as such when anomalous activity occurs around someone who is *not* the focus or does *not* live at the primary infestation site (the haunted house), but has visited it or come into contact with someone who *does* live there. The contagion activity always occurs *away* from the primary infestation site too – for example, Michael and I had been to 42 Lock Street that very morning, and later, back at Michael's house, *The Borough of South Shields* was thrown to the floor with a thud. Neither Michael nor I was the poltergeist focus, and neither were we at the primary infested house. This contagion event, along



ABOVE LEFT: The Hodgson children's bedroom, where many of the events happened. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Matchboxes damaged by spontaneous combustion without igniting contents; the small box is from the Enfield poltergeist case, the large one from the Holloway poltergeist case. **BELOW:** The Hodgson house at 284 Green Street, Ealing.

with the others documented at South Shields, had us fascinated. It triggered the memories of reading those early books, which in turn made me want to know more; so I set out looking for other cases where the contagion effect was discussed or reported. Essentially, what I wanted to demonstrate was that contagion-like effects had occurred in *other* cases, and not just my own. If I could find examples elsewhere, it would tell me that South Shields was not simply a 'one-off'; I was not disappointed. Now, if we look back at four other accounts of well-documented poltergeist cases, and further examples from the South Shields affair, we will clearly see that 'contagion' or 'poltergeist-infection' is a phenomenon that most definitely occurs and is well worth further exploration.

THE ENFIELD CASE, 1977-1979

When we think of the Enfield poltergeist (FT32:47, 33:04, 166:39, 288:18, 293:37, 299:14-15, 329:51), the events that usually spring to mind are those famous images of Janet Hodgson being thrown or levitated from her bed that were taken by the *Daily Mirror* photographer Graham Morris. Perhaps you may recall the gruff voice that emanated from Janet claiming to be 'Bill Wilkins', the red pillow that spontaneously appeared on the roof of the house, or the fireplace being torn out of the wall by an unseen and incredibly strong force. But not all of the poltergeist phenomena that occurred happened at 284 Green Street; and they didn't all centre on Janet either. You may be surprised to learn that a number of contagion events occurred during these investigations.

Next door to the Hodgson family lived the Nottinghams. They too experienced the Green

Street poltergeist in their own home – interestingly, when Janet or any other members of her immediate family were absent from the premises. Playfair tells us that on one afternoon, a resident of the house – Mr Nottingham's son – poured himself a drink and sat down to enjoy it. When he reached over to pick up the glass, he was perplexed to find it completely empty. Further instances occurred. A key went missing and was later found in an old van belonging to the Nottinghams, and objects in the house were reported to have been mysteriously moved around. It seemed the poltergeist had moved next door. Having noticed these things, some of the Nottinghams' close friends became too terrified to visit; one witness who heard strange noises in the house was too afraid to even talk about it in an official statement, worried about taking it back home to Leeds.⁶

Lead investigator, and member of the Society for Psychical Research, Maurice Grosse was alleged to have experienced contagion at *his* home too. His wife's wedding ring, kept safe in a little pot on their dressing table, vanished into thin air one day and reappeared weeks later – the same day that he sent his insurance claim off in the post. Grosse and his wife Betty had spent weeks searching for it in vain, only for it to reappear in the same pot from which it went missing. Grosse also reported hearing unexplained footsteps upstairs in his house when he knew that no one was up there, along with a loud banging noise that he heard "right next to him" as he

was standing in his garden. His car engine also failed to operate properly at times during the Enfield outbreak, which *could* have had a prosaic explanation, but was subsequently commented on by 'the voice' that emanated from Janet, suggesting there may have been a link. Janet had never been told about Grosse's car.



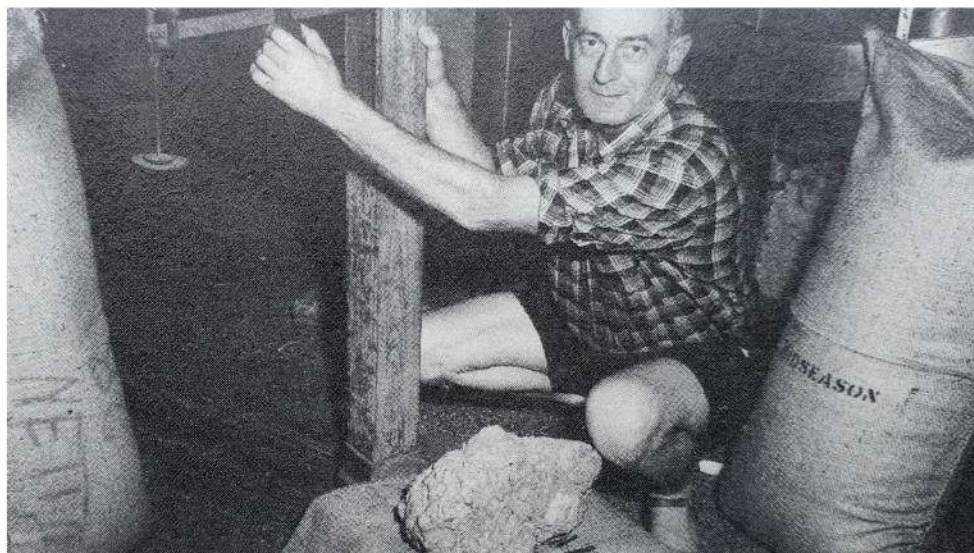
During the latter part of 1977, Grosse undertook another poltergeist investigation in Holloway, also in north London. There, instances of mysterious fire-starting had occurred. Upon his return to Enfield, lo and behold, spontaneous fires began there too. The Holloway poltergeist also set fire to a box of matches that was kept inside a drawer, scorching the box

they were contained in but *not* actually setting fire to the matches themselves. An identical incident repeated itself at Enfield, prompting Grosse to ask: "Are poltergeists contagious like diseases?"

THE MAYANUP POLTERGEIST, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 1955-1957

Mayanup is a small town in Western Australia. In 1955 poltergeist events started on a small farm there and were reportedly witnessed by hundreds of people; it is said to be one of the best attested poltergeist cases in Australia (see FT147:57).

This case is strikingly similar to the Humpy-Doo poltergeist which occurred 43 years *after* Mayanup in 1998 (see FT112:21, 116:34-39), at least in relation to its stone-throwing antics (sometimes known as lithobolia).



LITHOBOLIA:

OR, THE
Stone - Throwing Devil.

BEING

An Exact and True Account (by way of Journal) of the various Actions of Infernal Spirits, or *(Devils Incarnate)* Witches, or both; and the great Disturbance and Amazement they gave to *George Walton's Family*, at a place call'd *Great Island* in the Province of *New-Hampshire* in *New-England*, chiefly in Throwing about (by an Invisibile hand) *Stones, Bricks, and Brick-bats* of all Sizes, with several other things, as *Hammers, Mails, Iron-Crows, Spits*, and other *Domestick Utensils*, as came into their Hellish Minds, and this for the space of a Quarter of a Year.

By *R. C. Elq*, who was a Sojourner in the same Family the whole Time, and an Ocular Witness of these Diabolick Inventions.

The Contents hereof being manifestly known to the Inhabitants of that Province, and Persons of other Provinces, and is upon Record in his Majesties Council-Court held for that Province.

L O N D O N,

Printed, and are to be Sold by *E. Whitlock* near *Stationers-Hall*, 1698.

ABOVE LEFT: Bill Hack with the 35lb (16kg) rock that landed on the Smith family's water tank in Mayanup in 1957. ABOVE RIGHT: *Lithobolia*, a 1698 account of a "Stone-Throwing Devil". BELOW: A report in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* of 19 January 1969 makes it clear that the Olive Hill poltergeist was not centred on one location.

Lithobolia, The Stone Throwing Devil of Great Island, was the 7,000-word folk tale about an invisible stone-throwing fiend that was first published in 1698 and based on events that had occurred in 1682. The Mayanup affair was detailed in *Australian Poltergeist* by Tony Healy and Paul Cropper in 2014, and it was here that I first became aware of the account and its related contagion.

The Mayanup farm, called 'Keninup', was run by Bill and Ethel Hack, who also had a number of employees living on site. Gilbert Smith was one such employee, living approximately half a mile away on a small hillock with his wife Jean and their five children. It was at this small galvanised shack, where the phenomena first manifested in May 1955. Smith, who was 36, complained to the Hacks that someone had been pelting his little house with stones and bricks, but a search revealed no one could be found to account for the barrage. Later, during meal time, the bombardment continued, with projectiles hitting his walls and roof; again, Smith went outside to see if he could apprehend a culprit, but there was no one around. Now, he was becoming really frightened.

A number of 'all night watches' were set up and carried out by the Hacks, hoping to catch a perpetrator in the act, but to no avail. What they did observe was so unbelievable that they began to question their own sanity. Bill Hack and his brother claimed to have seen the stones materialising out of thin air before falling on to the shack. After appearing, it was reported that they fell in an unexpected manner, slowly, and with unusual trajectories. More stone throwing was observed *inside* the shack too, and continued to occur almost on a nightly basis for the next four months, eventually ceasing in September 1955. The poltergeist focus in this case was thought to be Jean Smith, Gilbert's wife. She was pregnant at the time, struggling to cope with her dying father, and was also said to have had "something of a volatile personal-

Bill Hack saw the stones materialising out of thin air



ity". It was noted that stones only fell when she was at home.

Healy and Cropper then tell us: "On 19 June, one month after it began its activities at 'Keninup', the polt extended its activities across the Boyup Brook-Kojonup Road to another large property, Lynford Hill." A family named Krakouer lived there, relatives of Jean Smith, with Molly Krakouer being her niece. Healy and Cropper continue: "...the Krakouers became involved in the mysterious events right from the beginning: frequently visiting the polt-plagued dwelling and even staying overnight to provide comfort and support. Their acts of kindness, however, landed them in a weird world of

trouble: the polt evidently took a shine to them, and followed them home."

As with the Smiths' poltergeist, the Lynford Hill occurrences mainly entailed stone throwing, although at the Smiths' residence, the 'primary infestation site', other poltergeist phenomena were also documented, including apports, where objects seemingly appear from nowhere. This is another telling point, as we find that poltergeist contagion events are normally diluted and are not as intense as in the 'primary infestation'. Healy and Cropper then make another significant statement, saying that "it is important to note that the polt didn't cease its activities at 'Keninup' during that time; *stones fell simultaneously on both properties*." This is significant, because when one becomes a victim of poltergeist contagion; the phenomena at the 'primary infestation site' always remain ongoing and active. The Smiths' poltergeist had clearly initiated the contagion process.

OLIVE HILL, KENTUCKY, USA, 1968

A newspaper article by George Wolford, published on 20 November 1968 in the *Ashland Daily Independent*, was spotted by a sharp-eyed aficionado of psychical research and subsequently cut out and sent to the Psychical Research Foundation (PRF). The PRF was founded in the US in 1961 and dedicated to research and education in the field of parapsychology. The late William G Roll (FT286:26, 190:38-44, 303:72) was its long-serving research director, and it is from his 1972 book *The Poltergeist* that the details of this case originate. This was a poltergeist outbreak where one event took place that convinced Roll beyond all doubt that it was most worthy of investigation; it was also a contagion event. (see FT293:36-37)

Tommy and Helen Callihan lived near Henderson Branch in Kentucky's Cumberland Mountains with their son Roger Callihan, four other siblings and an adopted teenage girl. However, despite many un-



LEFT: A detailed account of the Olive Hill poltergeist case appeared in *Beyond* magazine in October 1969, featuring photographs of the damage caused to John and Ora Kelly's belongings. ABOVE: The late William G. Roll, author of a major study of the poltergeist phenomenon, travelled to Kentucky to investigate this complex case at first hand.

explained occurrences in their small and neatly furnished home, this wasn't where the problem began.

The disturbances actually commenced at the home of John and Ora Callihan, Tommy's elderly parents, who lived nearby. Unexplained breakages and unaccountable noises convinced them they were living with something strange. Over time, Mrs Callihan is reported to have "filled two buckets with broken glass and porcelain", as well as having "four crockery lamps" smashed to pieces by the unseen force, and items of furniture "turned over". A picture of Jesus hanging on their wall was also shattered by the poltergeist. Becoming too frightened to stay in their home, they fled and relocated to an area known as Zimmerman Hill.

A week after the move, the poltergeist made its presence known to John and Ora yet again: it had followed them. Ora claimed to have seen the ghost of a man, and had identified him as the previous occupant of the home they had just left who had died five years previously. Then, the following day, things in the house began moving around on their own; Ora assumed that the ghost she had seen the day before was responsible.

Roll had not yet visited Olive Hill, but after having discussions with George Wolford in December of 1968 and realising the case was still ongoing, he dispatched John P Stump, a psychology student from North Carolina University and an associate of the Psychical Research Foundation, to Olive Hill to investigate. There had been over 90 events reported by the time Stump arrived on the scene, and a further 50 events documented shortly after his arrival. Some of these events he saw for himself, including the movement of two bottles and a jar as they relocated themselves two feet, going from standing on

the sink to being *inside* the sink. On another occasion, he watched in bewilderment as a chair flipped over and upside down, with the closest person being three feet away. Stump "was in a position to satisfy himself that there was no contrivance by any of those present and that known physical forces were not involved".

After witnessing many more poltergeist events, he telephoned Roll and suggested that he come and see the poltergeist in action for himself. On 14 December 1968, Roll arrived at Olive Hill and took the opportunity to accompany Tommy and Helen back to their home near Henderson Branch in order to interview them in relation to the case. After their children had been put to bed, and as the interviews were about to commence, the poltergeist unleashed its ferocity in the bedrooms upstairs by throwing objects around. In fact, a week or so earlier, Tommy and Helen had been troubled on two other occasions by a knocking sound for which they could find no explanation. Although it was a little odd, they thought nothing of it at that time. Now Helen was becoming very distressed: the poltergeist had clearly moved in with them. Up to this point, it had only been operating in the house of her in-laws, John and Ora. But now, it seemed to have "changed its stamping ground".⁸ Roll then witnessed an astounding event, which convinced him this case was of 'parapsychological interest'. In *The Poltergeist* (p148), he explains that on 16 December: "I was walking behind 12-year-old Roger Callihan as he entered the kitchen of his home. When he came to the sink, he turned toward me and at that moment the kitchen table, which was on his right, jumped in the air, rotated about 45 degrees, and came to rest on the back of the chairs that stood around it, with all four legs

off the floor."

Roll was convinced this event was entirely paranormal in nature as he was looking directly at Roger when it occurred and had noticed he was nowhere near the table and did not touch it in any way. Unable to see how the table could have moved in a *normal* way, he concluded it must have been somehow moved in an *abnormal* way. "The cups and plates, which had been left on the table," Roll says, "crashed to the floor." Other contagion events occurred at Tommy and Helen's home, including another incident with a heavy table moving on its own. Roll had wanted to document the movement of this table, but he was stopped by Helen, who, as Roll explains (p.155), had come to the view that: "Far from being helpful, John and I were actually in some way in league with the demon and had brought it from the grandparents' home to theirs."

On 17 December, Roll and Stump abandoned the investigation – amicably, if reluctantly – at the behest of Helen, and left.

THE CARDIFF POLTERGEIST, 1989-1991

This was a case that was recorded and written up in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* by the late Professor David Fontana (1934-2010) who personally investigated and witnessed for himself the puzzling events in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁹ The outbreak began at a small privately owned lawnmower workshop in Cardiff, Wales, which belonged to John and Pat Matthews (see FT381:20). The poltergeist, that had been named 'Pete' by the owners, was extraordinarily responsive: when it was asked to perform a feat, or produce some phenomena, it almost always accommodated such requests.

A good example of this was when the



ABOVE LEFT: The 1980 Cardiff poltergeist made newspaper headlines and was the subject of an episode of the series *Strange But True* in 1994. ABOVE RIGHT: Mower Services, the focus for most of the phenomena. BELOW: Reverend Mike Fuller also experienced odd goings-on in the Baptist church next to the mower workshop.

investigators asked for coins to be paranormally produced. Old pennies, dating from around 1912, appeared out of the blue and hit the floor with a clatter. Many other well-attested examples showed just how helpful 'Pete the poltergeist' was. A suggestion was made that notes should be taken so that a diary of events could be recorded; no sooner had these words been uttered than a pen and paper materialised out of nowhere and dropped to the floor in front of the astonished investigators. One of the best examples of the poltergeist's responsiveness was the 'stone throwing' game devised by Fontana. Small pebbles would be thrown into a corner of the workshop when investigators knew for certain nobody was occupying that area; the pebbles would be tossed back towards them. Some of the pebbles were actually 'marked' by the investigators, indicating it was the *same* pebbles that had been returned.

The poltergeist centred on the owners of the property and business, John and Pat Matthews. Two of their relations, Fred and Gerry Cook, also worked there and it is with them that the contagion aspect of this account lies. It is said that when the paranormal activity dwindled after the business relocated its premises, Pete 'attached' itself to Fred (or Gerry; it's unclear which) and began to operate within their family home. Fred, it seemed, had an 'affinity' with Pete, and, according to John and Anne Spencer, "closely associated himself to the phenomena", finding them "very special".

More money, this time modern legal tender, would materialise in the Cook home in the form of pound coins, with anything up to £15 a month being counted. Framed pictures would be moved and in some instances turned around so that the pictures faced the walls.

Surely, then, we must at least consider the possibility that Fred or Gerry was the real focus of the Cardiff Poltergeist, and not John or Pat? They *were* present at the workshop

When it was asked
to perform a feat,
it almost always
accommodated
such requests



during most, if not all, of the activity; it then seemingly followed *them* home. However, if Fred or his wife Gerry wasn't the poltergeist focus, merely observers of its antics, then here we have some documented instances of poltergeist contagion.

SOUTH SHIELDS POLTERGEIST, 2005-2006

It seems fitting to end this write-up where my interest in the contagion phenomenon began – at least in an investigative capacity – and that is at South Shields in the North East of England. The poltergeist outbreak there began in December 2005 and eventually ceased towards the end of October 2006 (see FT239:28, 60, 243:73, 293:37). The case first came to my attention on 19 June 2006, when I was at work; a colleague approached me and informed me that her "friend's daughter had a ghost".

I contacted my colleague's friend, June Peterworth, who told me in detail about what she had personally experienced at her daughter Marianne's home. I then telephoned Marianne and offered any assistance I could provide. The troubled home was an ordinary looking two-bedroomed terraced house on the outskirts of a modern estate in South Tyneside.

There were three people living in the house: Marianne, her partner Marc (both in their early twenties), and Marianne's three-year-old son Robert. They had been residing there for a number of years trouble-free when, suddenly, alarming activity they could neither rationalise nor comprehend began to occur, including mysterious banging, objects being displaced or thrown around, the overturning of furniture, the opening and closing of doors and ghostly figures or 'apparitions' being seen. For the next four weeks, I received telephone calls from Marianne informing me of new developments, and, at my request, she also kept a diary of events.

My first visit to Lock Street occurred on 17 July. I was accompanied by Michael J Hallowell and after our preliminary interviews with Marianne and Marc were carried out a rapport soon grew between us. The day proved pivotal for both investigators and family, as all four of us witnessed anomalous activity, such as children's toys being thrown around Robert's bedroom.

Although on the surface, this appeared to be essentially a harmless encounter with a ghost or a low level poltergeist, the anomalous activity became more frequent and grew in its intensity over the following months, leading us to suspect something more disturbing was taking place. The poltergeist became extremely hostile and began to terrorise the family. It threw knives around the house, sent threatening text messages to Marianne, took Robert from one location and relocated him elsewhere in the house while he was asleep and physically attacked Marc.



ABOVE LEFT AND CENTRE: The South Shields Poltergeist often moved items in the bedroom of Marianne's three-year-old son. **ABOVE RIGHT:** It became increasingly hostile, allegedly leaving Marc with scratches on his body. **BELOW:** Michael Hollowell (left) and Darren Ritson conducted an investigation into the events.

But its interest appeared to extend beyond this one family.

Along with the instance of contagion briefly described at the beginning of this article, a number of other instances of 'poltergeist infection' took place during the course of the outbreak. These included an incident at the London home of a media consultant and news reporter named Natalie Lisbona. Shortly after viewing some of the South Shields poltergeist footage we had been asked to send to her, a packet of lentils was thrown out of her cupboard and deposited itself all over her kitchen floor. If that wasn't strange enough, she and her husband, while lying in bed, repeatedly heard the sound of someone trying to place a key in her front door and open the lock. There was never anyone inside or outside her home when they checked.

One of the most extraordinary examples of poltergeist contagion occurred to someone not even connected to the case – at least not directly, at that point. The individual concerned, Danny, was a friend of Michael Hollowell's and he experienced a very strange incident. This however, would only become clear hours afterwards.

On Wednesday, 31 August 2006, when the poltergeist infestation at Lock Street was at its most intense, Michael received a call from Danny. The call was made to his mobile phone just before 2am, but, by the time he retrieved his phone to answer it, it had stopped ringing. He rang Danny back, and was mystified when he denied making a call to him; his phone had been sitting on the dashboard of his car and he hadn't used it in hours. However, when Danny checked his call log he discovered that his phone *had* made a call to Michael's mobile just before 2am. The obvious mystery was how that phone had, without any human intervention, made the call in the early hours of the morning. But there was a deeper mystery. As Michael later found out, it transpired that at the very time the call was made, Danny had been driving



past Lock Street – the abode of the South Shields poltergeist.

Contagion event or coincidence? You could be forgiven for thinking this was a chance-in-a-million coincidence: that Danny's phone rang Michael's at that particular time due to some sort of technological glitch. But when you take into account that the mobile phone called Michael's phone, A) without human assistance, and B) at the precise moment Danny was driving past Lock Street, it becomes all the more intriguing. Based on other accounts of tech-savvy poltergeists that seem to be obsessed with computers, TVs, landlines and mobile telephones, it's clear that that these things *do* happen. *How* they happen is another question, but I have attempted to throw together a workable hypothesis in my book *Poltergeist Parallels and Contagion*, in which these and other cases are discussed in depth.¹⁰

Based on the examples I have cited above,

and others documented elsewhere, it seems that poltergeists do have an ability to reach out and infect others. It seems a fantastic idea, but perhaps by looking into the contagion aspect of poltergeist outbreaks we might one day be able to shed further light on a phenomenon that has baffled and confused us for so long.

Poltergeist Parallels and Contagion is published in the UK and USA by White Crow Books and is available in paperback and on Kindle.

NOTES

- 1** The addresses and names of those involved in the case have been changed to protect their privacy.
- 2** MJ Hollowell & DW Ritson, *The South Shields Poltergeist: One Family's Fight Against an Invisible Intruder* (Sutton Publishing, 2008).
- 3** J & A Spencer, *The Poltergeist Phenomenon: An Investigation into Psychic Disturbance* (Headline, 1996).
- 4** D. Scott Rogo, *The Poltergeist Experience* (Penguin Books, 1979)
- 5** DW Ritson & MJ Hollowell, *Contagion: In the Shadow of the South Shields Poltergeist* (Limbury Press, 2014)
- 6** GL Playfair, *This House is Haunted: An investigation of the Enfield Poltergeist* (Souvenir Press, 1980).
- 7** Tony Healy & Paul Cropper, *Australian Poltergeist* (Strange Nation, 2014),
- 8** WG Roll, *The Poltergeist* (Nelson Doubleday, 1972)
- 9** David Fontana, "A Responsive Poltergeist: a case from South Wales", *JSPR*, Vol 57, No 823, p385-403.
- 10** DW Ritson, *Poltergeist Parallels and Contagion*, (White Crow Books, 2021).

➡ **DARREN W RITSON** is a member of the Society for Psychical Research, a black belt in judo and the author of *The South Shields Poltergeist* (2008), *The Haunting of Willington Mill* (2011) and *Ghosts at Christmas* (2011). His latest book is *Poltergeist Parallels and Contagion* (2021).



PAT SPAIN is a TV presenter, writer, explorer and cryptozoologist best known for his wildlife shows on National Geographic, Animal Planet and others. He also happens to be the great nephew of Charles Fort. **ETIENNE GILFILLAN** tracked him down and spoke to him about his extraordinary career, cryptozoological passions, family history and the power of synchronicity...

MAY THE FORT BE WITH YOU



"I have spent much time thinking about the alleged pseudo-relations that are called coincidences. What if some of them should not be coincidences?"

Charles Fort

A FORT IN THE FAMILY

EG: I first heard of you when by some strange twist of fate I decided to look for Charles Fort pictures on Instagram, assuming I'd come away empty handed. Instead, I found pictures of his great nephew! When did you first hear of Charles Fort?

PS: It was from my grandmother, Hattie, when I was a kid.

She'd say, "You're just like your Uncle Charlie" – but I didn't know who that was. I mean, I knew that she was a Fort, but I never put the two together at all.

EG: So when did the penny drop?

PS: I was in high school and it was when she saw me reading *The*

Book of the Damned and said, you know, that's your Uncle Charlie. I looked up at her, totally shocked!

EG: Did that instigate a search for more Fort material?

PS: Absolutely. And then she brought out all these books, that I still have, signed and made out to different family members, and she said, "Yes, this is your Uncle Charlie. This is who I've been talking about. He wrote all these books on strange phenomena." I had no idea!

EG: Did you ever hear any family stories or anecdotes about Fort?

PS: Unfortunately, not really – just that the family respected him, but thought that he was a little out there.

EG: Does your family have any letters written by him?

PS: Absolutely! My parents and Aunt Nancy gathered everything together when I told them about this interview and surprised me by bringing it all to me. I'm now the official Fort archivist for the family!

There are several pictures of him and his brothers together, a few letters, his father's will, and a half dozen newspaper clippings relating to his writings. This material was shared with Damon Knight and Jim Steinmeyer when they were writing their books about Fort.¹

I've also gone down to the New York Public Library to see his actual notes and all the index cards and everything. That was fascinating.

EG: I'm always hoping that there's a stash of forgotten Fort material somewhere. Or that if he went to the

British Library every day, maybe they kept a note of the newspapers and books he consulted.

PS: I think about that with a city like London. There must be old flats with hidden boxes or forgotten shoeboxes full of things from all the people who've ever lived there... I'm surprised original Darwin material doesn't turn up more often.

EARLY LIFE

EG: Your work as a wildlife biologist, as a *Beast Hunter* in National Geographic's cryptozoology TV series and now as the author of a series of cryptozoology books presents us with a scientist who is as knowledgeable as he is naturally inquisitive. Can you remember the first time, as a child, that your curiosity was piqued by the natural world?

PS: My parents will say it's from when I was born. They just could never keep me away from it. But from my actual memories, I can remember seeing the ocean for the first time when I was about three years old. My parents had been reading to me at that point, and I had asked my mom to read me everything she could find about the ocean.

I was absolutely blown away – so they then took me to an aquarium. I had no idea that I would be able to see these animals that I had read about – like I could actually see them. And they put me down in front of the New England aquarium. It's an older style concrete building. It's not a big, open, beautiful space: it's dark, it smells like the ocean. I love

Little
Bigfoot

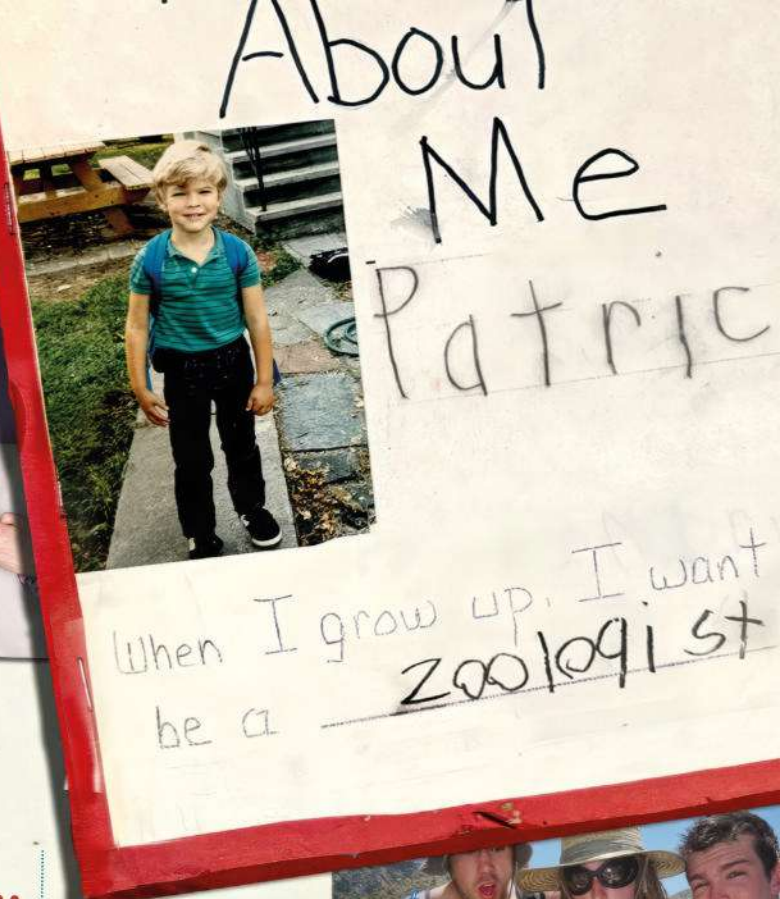
the Hunt in Sumatra

or,
I Learned That Are
Things That Really
Not Seem Like Ohlokon
PAT SPAIN

ABOVE LEFT: Detail of a letter from Charles Fort to his brother Raymond.

RIGHT: Raymond Fort, Pat Spain's great great grandfather.

TOP: A school portrait of Charles Fort (second from right) and Raymond Fort (far right) with classmates.



everything about it! It's absolutely wonderful. The building itself is square and then there's a big circle in the middle. That's a huge tank, and there's tanks all along the wall as you're going up. My parents put me down in front of the first tank, and I just stood there with my hands on the glass... I just couldn't move! They were asking me questions, and I couldn't speak. And then they just picked me up, still like this, and put me in front of the next tank. And that's how we made our way around. And all the way at the top tank, at the top, is the octopus.

EG: What was so important about the octopus?

PS: They are amazing animals! Giant squid reach that size in less than five years! So they're huge, they're incredibly intelligent, but they don't live very long. And those three things don't really go together in any other group of animals. Scientists speculate that the brain actually developed to give them the power needed for their large eyes, and then with that came intelligence.

EG: Speaking of aquariums, I discovered the other day that Japan has an aquarium to house deep sea species... I was surprised as we're often told about how these creatures die when brought up from the depths. **PS:** I think what kills them in most cases is that they bring them up too quickly rather than allowing them to acclimatise as they're brought up. And actually the largest migration of creatures happens in our oceans, every night! At dusk, creatures of the deep come up to the surface to feed in something called the vector diel migration.

For *Beast Hunter*, we went looking for Caddy, a sea serpent referred to for centuries by First Nation tribes in Canada and Alaska. I got to explore the waters off Vancouver Island by submersible, going 1,000ft (300m) down. My childhood dream! The most remarkable things we saw were squid and a giant lions' mane jellyfish. The deep sea is such an alien environment – being down there makes you realise there could be anything hiding there and we'd never know!



HARRY ASKED ME IF I'D EVER HEARD OF A MAN NAMED CHARLES FORT...

EG: Were you into cryptozoology as a kid?

PS: I was always fascinated by the less well understood creatures of the world. The deep sea, nocturnal animals, microscopic life – all of it was endlessly interesting to me. And the possibility of undiscovered creatures was so exciting. I wanted to read everything I could about the famous cryptids, and then go on Bigfoot spotting missions all over upstate New York. So I did! Then I read about lesser known cryptids – the Mongolian death worm, Champ, the Yeren – and I was hooked. I wanted to know more, and I never outgrew that fascination with that realm of possible, if unlikely, creatures of the world.

CRYPTO-TV

EG: So how did a kid obsessed with wildlife and weird animals end up presenting TV series and writing books about his adventures?

PS: I was fascinated by marine biology and got involved with that when I was 16, and I found I really enjoyed doing wildlife education and giving talks – I loved getting people as enthused about wildlife as I was. I went to Suffolk University in Boston to major in marine biology, and got a job in biotech after I graduated. But I still found myself giving impromptu talks about horseshoe crabs or whatever to kids on the beach.

My girlfriend Anna – now my wife – suggested that perhaps this love of wild animals and public speaking might find a better outlet on TV. She saw an ad on Animal Planet looking for the “next wildlife host” via a reality competition show called *King of the Jungle 2*, so we made an audition tape. It was really bad... but I got picked for the show and finished as the runner up. I realised I really liked making TV, so with help from Anna and a couple of friends I created *Nature Calls* – a web-based punk-rock wildlife adventure series that I wrote, produced, edited, starred in, directed and paid for. So for the next six years I was working 60+ hour weeks at my biotech job and putting in at least another 40 into *Nature Calls*. But it eventually brought me to the attention of Harry Marshall, the CEO of Icon Films, who was working on a project for National Geographic... this was my dream combo. And they were calling me!

ABOVE LEFT: Icon Films CEO Harry Marshall and Pat Spain.

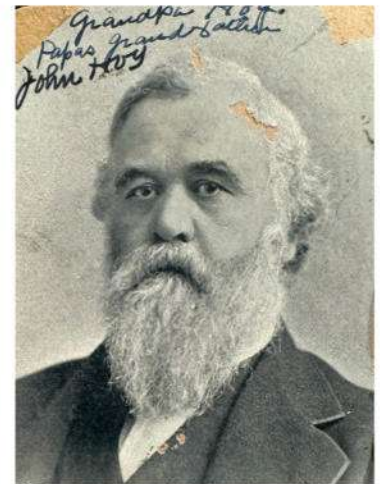
TOP RIGHT: Pat Spain's obsession with zoology was evident in a 'book' he put together at the age of five.

CENTRE RIGHT: A still from *Nature Calls*, Pat's first YouTube show.

LEFT: Pat, Wally, Anna and Luna on a family wildlife outing.



phia Record, and and Mr. Fort's widow, the Alice Filan. Dreiser termed Mr. Fort, who voted many years in scientific point out errors in the "one of the g... ever has



ABOVE LEFT: Aggie Hoy, Charles Fort's mother. ABOVE CENTRE: A photo of (left-right) Raymond, Charles and Clarence Fort. ABOVE RIGHT: Charles Fort's grandfather, John Hoy. BELOW: Pat Spain with his copy of *The Book of the Damned* inscribed by Charles Fort to his grandfather Raymond Fort and his wife Tess.

EG: And is this what became *Beast Hunter*?

PS: Yes, exactly, and that's also where Charles Fort comes back into the story! Harry wanted to do a show about cryptozoology – to bring some credibility to it – and called me to see if I knew anything about the subject. After I gave him my thoughts on various cryptids, he asked if I had ever heard of a man named Charles Fort. I replied, "That's my great Uncle!" This was followed by complete silence on the line, and then the very British Harry simply said, "No shit?", a very un-British response. And so we both laughed and started planning the series...

EG: That's an amazing bit of synchronicity!

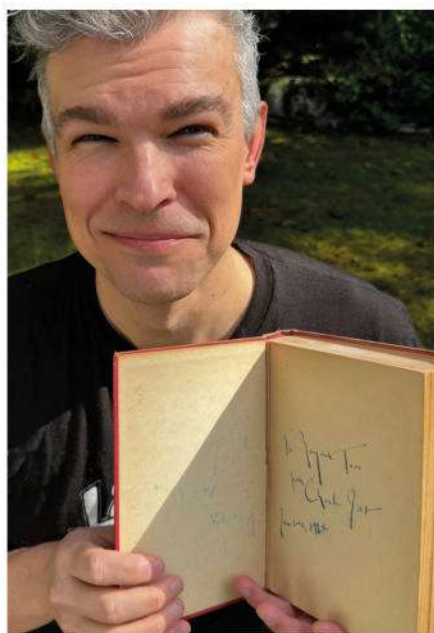
Yes! Another unusual coincidence between Fort and myself is that both of our wives are called Anna! And both Annas helped nurse their partners back to health before their marriages. [At the age of 30, just as he had completed filming *Beast Hunter*, Pat was diagnosed with stage 3 colon cancer. He underwent more than a year of treatment and used his experience to become a cancer advocate to raise awareness].

What sort of reaction do you get when discussing Fort or cryptozoology with other people – for instance, with other scientists?

PS: Well, those who know and love his books – it's similar to Harry's reaction! But some people know Fort from pop-culture references – films and TV shows like *The X-Files* – and think he's a made-up character... they're surprised to find he was a real man! With cryptids, some scientists will start to get a little uncomfortable – but then I can usually get their guard down and get them talking and theorising and having fun.

ON THE HUNT

EG: Your books document your adventures on *Beast Hunter* across the Gobi Desert in search of the Mongolian death worm, as well as braving the remote wilds of West Africa to look for the mokele-mbembe. But most frightening to me, on that expedition, you chose to sleep in the room with the most



spiders... don't they crawl into your bed?

PS: I mean, yeah, I found a couple in my pillows and on my sleeping bags. But I love spiders – I think they're great. And the reason I always pick the room with the most spiders is because they're going to eat the nasty stuff.

EG: Going back to the mokele-mbembe, did you speak to anybody who claimed they had actually seen the creature?

PS: Yes, but in this case I felt like people were not being honest with us. I'm not faulting anyone. I don't want to ruin anyone's reputation or blame them, because they have a very hard life, a very tough existence, and this is something that brings them things – it brings people to them that wouldn't otherwise go there.

EG: I see – the need to make money can alter the 'facts', not just in Africa, of course, but in every place where a story brings people, TV crews and ultimately money. You visited Sumatra in search of the Orang Pendek. Did you feel that people there were offering a similarly embroidered narrative?

PS: There, I didn't get the sense at all that we were being misled, because it was treated as such a mundane animal. The interesting thing in Sumatra and Indonesia was that they wanted to talk more about tigers, because tigers are really the spiritual beings, the really incredible creatures. But with the Orang Pendek, they were almost underselling it... like, why do you care so much about this creature?

EG: Food is a big part of all your books.

When you were travelling to these far-flung destinations, did you end up eating things that you wouldn't have chosen to?

PS: I was vegetarian for a large part of my life – when I was younger, and then I did it again in my twenties – but then I stopped, because I was working so many crazy hours. And my doctor said, some people can be vegetarian and be healthy – you're not one of those people. So once I stopped, I kind of drew a line for myself, and that's endangered species and primates and anything alive. I won't eat anything that is actually living when I put it in my mouth.

EG: Which do you imagine would be the tastiest cryptid?

PS: The worst would definitely be the giant squid or the kraken, because giant squid bodies are essentially ammonia. So that would be the worst! I'd say the tastiest or the most interesting would be the Mongolian death worm. Grubs are delicious. Insects taste like whatever they eat. So, you can raise crickets on a diet of fruit and they'll be delicious worms, that kind of thing. So I would guess that, depending on what it had been eating, the death worm would be pretty good.

EG: What about a Yeti?

PS: That would cross my line. Primate. But the Yeti is a really interesting case: it's the perfect example of how the public has a perception of something and unless what you find actually fits that perception, then they don't believe that you found it. So, if you might find a new species of bear that *lives* in the area where



ABOVE LEFT: Pat makes a friend at Costa Rica's Sloth Sanctuary in a 2007 episode of *Nature Calls*. ABOVE RIGHT: Searching for Cadborosaurus in a deep sea submersible in the Agamemnon Channel, British Columbia, for *Beast Hunter*. BELOW: Pat and Loren Coleman at the International Cryptozoology Museum, Portland Maine.

the Yeti is reported and *behaves* as the Yeti is said to behave... you might make this amazing scientific discovery, and the general public would still go, yeah, but you didn't find the Yeti!

INFLUENCES

EG: Were any cryptozoology (or zoology) authors a big influence on you?

PS: I've always loved how Loren Coleman presents cryptids in a biological context; his writing is engaging because it *feels* like he's describing real, biological species. I love David Quammen's *The Song of the Dodo*, which was one of my favourites in high school, and his later writing on infectious diseases should be required reading. I read *On the Origin of Species* in junior high and was absolutely obsessed with it. Darwin is still a hero of mine – my son is named Wallace Charles after Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles Darwin and Charles Fort.

And of course Karl Shuker, whose Shuker Nature blog and multitude of books are incredible compendiums of the most extraordinary creatures...

EG: Your own books have a really lively, anecdotal 'adventure'-style of narrative...

PS: In that 'adventure' space, I love J Maarten Troost. His are the funniest travelogues I've ever read and I definitely tried to emulate his style. I know it's fiction, but Kurt Vonnegut, especially *Sirens of Titan* and *Galapagos*, was a big influence as well.

ET: You've worked extensively in the television industry – what programmes have particularly impressed you?

PS: The two that jump out the most – well, one isn't a crypto-programme, but a wildlife show called *Buggin' with Ruud*. I believe he's a Dutch New Zealander, and it was like six or eight episodes. And I have scoured the Internet trying to find this and trying to buy it because I know that my kids would love it. It was one of the best wildlife shows that I'd seen. This guy is an entomologist, he's fascinated by bugs, and he just presents it



in such a fun, kind of upbeat, really exciting way.²

And then the crypto show that I absolutely loved, and that was one of the reasons why I wanted to work with Icon films, was their film *Yeti: Hunt for the Wildman* from the early 2000s. Wow – that was just mind-blowing. Everything they filmed was gorgeous – it was beautifully shot, but also serious. It was treated in a scientific way without being pretentious or condescending. It was just: Here's what we found. Here's what it is. Talk to the locals – and we're going to really *listen* to what the locals are telling us. It's not the Western guy going in and telling them what they're seeing. It's presented in this really unique way. And I was floored.

EG: Do you think the modern viewing public think they're too savvy to believe in cryptids? Have we reached a point where science has solved so much that we just treat everything in the field of cryptozoology as myth or folklore?

PS: I think it's almost the opposite. We're so overloaded with stimuli and information, and we're so primed to believe anything without proper evidence, that we're at a

point where it's very hard to discern what's true and what's not. So you will get a group of people who don't believe anything and will write absolutely everything off. You'll get another group of people who will believe anything. The stranger it sounds – the more bizarre, the more outlandish – the more they *want* to believe it, and the more they'll dig in. And then you have the majority of people who are in the middle, who kind of shrug it all off, because they just can't put in the mental effort of separating fact from fiction. That's why so much has to be entertaining, because that group in the middle needs that connection, that kind of entertainment, that stimulus. It's gotten to the point where if you don't *want* to believe it, then it's not true – and that's dangerous.

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

EG: We've discussed how the search for cryptids can be influenced by various factors – scepticism, credulity, financial considerations, folkloric beliefs – but as both a scientist and an explorer, do you still think it possible that one of the 'classic' cryptids will actually be discovered? Where do you stand on Bigfoot, for example? Did you see the footage from Ontario and Michigan in the last couple of years?³

PS: The Ontario video hasn't been shown to be manipulated footage yet, so, it would seem a hoax is likely; but it looks good. The way it moves reminds me of the Patterson-Gimlin film. The Michigan one is less impressive and raises lots of questions: Why stop filming before it's out of view? Why stay at that distance? And Bigfoot in Michigan is a tough sell! I'm sceptical about Bigfoot in general. I'm not sold either way. I don't think it's impossible for a highly secretive, highly migratory, crepuscular creature with very small numbers to stay hidden and elude science (think of right whales) in the Great North Woods. I don't think it's likely – but it's not impossible. Plenty of people I know and respect think it's real. Gun to my head, I'd fall on the 'no' side of the debate – but, I'm much more comfortable in the middle.



ABOVE LEFT: Pat Spain gains local Brazilian tribesmen's trust by enduring the bullet ant initiation ritual in a 2011 episode of *Beast Hunter*. The pain is said to be like "fire-walking over flaming charcoal with a three-inch rusty nail in your heel." **ABOVE CENTRE:** Coyote Peterson (left) with Pat. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Pat Spain and his wife Anna, who has been instrumental in his successes since his University years, at a book signing at Salem's Far From The Tree cider brewery in Salem. **BELOW:** A rare sighting of a centaur in the Boston area, or maybe just Pat Spain bringing a bit of cryptozoological horseplay to the Hallowe'en season?

EG: What about the insect world?

Are there insect cryptids?

PS: An interesting topic! There are, but not ones people take "seriously" – I think Mothman is the closest – but that definitely goes to the paranormal side of the aisle. A lack of cryptid insects actually brings the whole issue of considering cryptozoology as a separate branch of biology to mind. Technically, any insect species known to local people but not described by "science" – not given a Latin name, with a holotype specimen, etc – *should* be a cryptid, but most people don't see it that way. They only think of "big sexy" animals as cryptids, and they think of "everything else" as "just biology". But I think of *all of it* as biology. The only thing that separates cryptozoology from field biology in my mind is a strong interest in cultural anthropology and folklore.

EG: So where might cryptids be found? The world's oceans?

PS: Well, with cryptids like Caddy – the supposed 'Cadborosaurus' or sea serpent – I think it's most likely we're looking at a new species of squid.

EG: How about the Poles? The speculation that remnants of some incredible unknown species will be uncovered as the ice melts...

PS: I wouldn't be surprised if we did find some other palaeolithic creatures that we weren't aware of – like contemporaries of the giant sloths and mastodons. I think that there are a lot of animals that we don't know about – ones for which we haven't found the fossils or the preserved remains. And if you're talking about Siberia, I'm sure that there's a lot to be found in the permafrost. As the world unfortunately warms, we *will* find them.

EG: What about a more recently extinct animal, the thylacine? I've seen some reports and even some footage that even had me wondering...

PS: The most compelling thing I've heard about the thylacine is how there's a difference

ON FAMILY WILDLIFE EXPEDITIONS, MY KIDS LIKE TO MAKE UP THEIR OWN CRYPTIDS FOR US TO SEARCH FOR!

between 'totally gone from the Earth' and 'functionally extinct', and how really the thylacine is functionally extinct. So it's not to say that there aren't a few pockets remaining, but it's not enough to sustain a population for the foreseeable future. So if there *are* any still out there, they're likely to be older individuals or a small pocket of them somewhere. And I think it's very possible that there are. I've had some friends who've gone out there on shoots looking for other things and have said they were looking around, they're like, "Yeah, I could see it being here." I think that eDNA – environmental DNA taken from soil or water, for example – is probably our best bet for finding them, because being able to sample that is a new technology. It hasn't really been used to look at cryptids, other than Nessie, which is kind of a waste.

EG: What's next for you?

PS: I've recently written my first children's picture book. My kids helped me write it – we had so much fun! It's based on a true story in which my daughter Luna brings a strange family tradition to light. It's written from the perspective of a scientist who really wants to teach kids, but doesn't know exactly how to talk to them as children – so he doesn't. It's the only kids' book I know of that quotes James Joyce, JD Salinger and Avril Lavigne. I have more that I'm brewing as well...



I also recently collaborated with Coyote Peterson on an episode for his Brave Wilderness YouTube channel. I've loved Coyote's work for a while, we have mutual friends, and we've both been stung by bullet ants and a lot of other creatures – so, it was only a matter of time before we worked together. Coyote is a great guy and a fantastic host. It was incredible to see him in action and have the opportunity to work with his crew. My kids, Luna and Wally, love him and we're planning some more adventures in the future.

In the meantime, Anna and I are already busy passing on our dedication to zoology and Charles Fort's legacy to the next generation. On family wildlife expeditions, Luna and Wally like to make up their own cryptids for us to search for! Usually giant moths, mystery cats with super powers like laser eyes, and out-of-place animals like kangaroos in our woods. And both of them believe in Bigfoot and really want to find one!

www.patspain.com

Pat Spain *Beast Hunter* bullet ants clip.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNLte53_evA

Coyote Peterson's Brave Wilderness
www.youtube.com/channel/UC6E2mP01ZLH_kbAyeazCNDg

NOTES

1 Damon Knight, *Charles Fort: Prophet of the Unexplained*, Doubleday, 1970; Jim Steinmeyer, *Charles Fort: The Man Who Invented the Supernatural*, Tarcher/Penguin, 2008.

2 www.imdb.com/title/tt1202252/

3 Ontario Bigfoot video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6sSRu20_I0&t=157s; Michigan Bigfoot video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Tid7JY4ZJ8>

➤ **ETIENNE GILFILLAN** has been the art director for *Fortean Times* since 1995. He has also written comics on fortan themes for the Belgian comic *Spirou* and more recently branched out into photography. His work can be seen at www.instagram.com/etiennephotography

THE LIVING DINOSAUR PICTURE ROUND

When you're on the track of the Mokele M'bembe in West Africa, one of the first problems is getting people to agree on what the legendary cryptid looks like and what it's actually called, as PAT SPAIN explains...

One of the legends around Mokele M'bembe (MM) touted to prove its existence and identity it as a dinosaur goes as follows: "When the local tribes are shown pictures of sauropods, they identify them as Mokele M'bembe." A quick online search will show you that this is not true, but it continues to be used as "proof" of a living dinosaur. First off, "local people" are not one group. They are from different tribes with vastly different traditions and customs, speak different languages, and have divergent accounts of MM. Some say there are multiple different dinosaur species: sauropod-like, protoceratops-like, ceratopsian-like, all with different local names; sometimes, in one tribe, the name for the protoceratops-like creature will be the same as the sauropod-like creature in another tribe, and the name of a known animal (like an elephant) in a third tribe. This makes any attempt at classification very difficult, and interviewing eyewitnesses almost impossible. You could (and we did) experience something like the following:

Tribe member: "I have seen Mokele M'bembe."

MM researcher: "Great! Can you describe it?"

"Like a rhino, but with six horns and a large back-plate behind its head."

"Do you mean Ngoubou?"

"No, Ngoubou is a rhino. This was like a rhino, but with..."

"Yes, six horns and a plate. Do you mean Njago-gunda?"

"No, Njago-gunda is like a hippo, but with a large horn and strong tail."

"That sounds like Chipekwe."

"Chipekwe is smaller than Emela-ntouka, larger than a rhino, and has a longish neck, short legs, and a tail with bony plates that stand two feet tall in rows down its back with spikes on the end of its tail."

"Okay, so what is Emela-ntouka?"

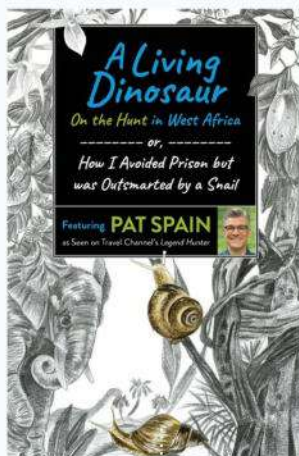
"Emela-ntouka is a huge beast, as big as three elephants, with a long tail and neck and very large spikes like spear-heads running down the length of its long neck, back, and tail."

"Yes, that one! Well, I've never heard the spikes part, but sounds good, close enough. Have you seen Emela-ntouka?"

"No, no one living has, they all died in my grandfather's grandfather's time."

"Okay, well, back to Mokele M'bembe, that still sounds very interesting and dinosaur-like..."

The names are hard to keep track of. I had a spreadsheet of each name for a "sauropod-like creature" in every language and every region we went to. If you get past the names and



just go with "locals pick out a photo of a sauropod as an animal they have seen", it still seems that each researcher has performed the photo experiment in their own way since it was first reported in the 1920s, and the way an experiment is structured matters.

Some researchers have shown tribe members a selection of drawings and asked, "Which one of these is Mokele M'bembe?" to which the majority of interviewees allegedly pick a picture of a dinosaur. This is a flawed experiment for a number of reasons. It presupposes that the animal exists, that the people being polled have heard of it and have seen it, and that they have seen and know all of the other animals which might be confused for MM which they are shown pictures of. Put yourself in the position of an indigenous person – you are shown photos of 15 animals and asked which one is MM. If you've never seen or heard about MM before, you can simply pick the picture of the animal you've never seen. Now, you might say, "But the researchers threw in a mix of images of local animals and ones they knew the tribes wouldn't be familiar with." Okay, let's assume that's true – which is a big assumption without actually seeing the set of drawings – and that these are folks who don't get a lot of visitors. There are all of these crazy Westerners causing a commotion and asking about this animal – if you've never heard of it before, you've probably heard something about it by the time you get to the picture round. Again, let's make a huge assumption and say foreigners show up in your remote Cameroonian village, and the first thing they do is show you a series of drawings of known and unknown animals and ask you which one is Mokele M'bembe – two words you've never heard before. You eliminate all of the animals you recognise – well that's an elephant, a rhino, a hippo, a gorilla, a rat, a crocodile, a python, and so on. You're left with a few images of bizarre-looking creatures. You're probably thinking, "These Westerners didn't come here to find that tiny animal that looks like an armoured pig, I'm guessing they want me to pick the biggest, most badass-looking animal out there," so you pick one of the dinosaur options. They are excited! They are happy! These crazy people.

Now, let's be realistic – this is not your opening move. You don't meet a tribe in a remote region of the Congo and immediately jump to "pick a card". There are customs to follow, greetings that must occur, niceties to observe. You chat for a while, establish trust, and determine if they even know about this animal. Let's forget the above scenario – of course the people you are asking have heard of

MM, you wouldn't be there if they hadn't; you would have established that they had never heard of it and moved on to the next village. So they have heard of it, but have they seen it? Have you ever seen a dragon? After hearing a detailed fairy tale about one, would you be able to pick the picture of a dragon out of a series of images of animals? Of course you would. Even so, the stories go that most people picked the picture of the dinosaur – most, not all. This means that even with the cards stacked so far in the favour of picking a dinosaur, some people still picked the warthog.

"This is Mokele M'bembe – look at its wide, fearsome jaws, bulging eyes, and horrific, twisted shape."

"Nope, that's my pug. His name is Sushi. Next villager please."

The above version would be great if there was no picture of a dinosaur in the mix, with the researcher asking, "Which of these is MM?", and using a control group, then see if the control group always picks the biggest animal, or the weirdest-looking one. As far as I know, this has never been done. Based on what I saw in West Africa, the kind people in the villages would want to please and pick a picture, telling you it was MM no matter what.

Other researchers have asked the question in a slightly better way. They show the villagers a series of images and for each one ask, "Can you name this animal?" This seems logical, reasonable, and has a built-in control to see if they are lying or guessing.

What I found was that there are a few contributing factors to how well a person did on identifying MM. A huge factor was the order in which the images were shown – a variable I don't believe any other researchers considered. My experience showed that, generally, the first large, non-furry animal the locals didn't recognise is called MM. A rhino, elephant, or hippo would receive a few votes for MM using this technique. If there is an area with a lot of hippos but no rhinos, rhinos are called MM if the picture of the rhino is shown before the picture of the sauropod. If the picture of the sauropod is shown first, that invariably gets the vote. Hippos, elephants, even crocodiles can all be MM depending on whether the locals have ever really seen one of those animals, and if the image of that animal is shown before or after the image of the sauropod. I didn't mix in other dinosaurs, but I believe doing that could go a long way to explaining the name confusion.

Extracted from *A Living Dinosaur: On the Hunt in West Africa* (Collective Ink Books, 2023)

Pat Spain's books (*A Little Bigfoot: On the Hunt in Sumatra*, *Mongolian Death Worm On the Hunt in the Gobi Desert*, *Sea Serpents: On the Hunt in British Columbia*, *A Living Dinosaur: On the Hunt in West Africa*, *A Bulletproof Ground Sloth: On the Hunt in Brazil* and *200,000 Snakes: On the Hunt in Manitoba*) are all available from Collective Ink Books (www.collectiveinkbooks.com)



TALES

FROM THE NEW MILLENNIUM PART ONE

For four decades up to 2019, Paul Sieveking selected and wrote up weird news stories for *Fortean Times*. Here are some of his favourite news reports from the first five years of the 21st century. For his selection of stories reported up to the turn of the millennium, see *FT*390:40-45, 394:46-49.

ANARCHIST MACAW

Barney, a five-year-old Macaw, once belonged to a retired truck driver who emigrated to Spain in 2002, after which he was acquired by the Warwickshire Animal Sanctuary in Nuneaton. His vivid blue and gold plumage and habit of saying “Thank you, big boy,” when given a digestive biscuit appealed to visitors. However, he was very fond of saying “bollocks!” and when a civic party came on tour, and he spotted the mayor’s chain and a woman vicar’s dog collar, his anarchist tendencies were revealed. “Fuck off!” he told the mayor before turning to the vicar: “You can fuck off too!” Also present were two policemen, to whom Barney said: “And you can fuck off, you wankers!” The pillars of the community took it in good part. The sanctuary’s owner, Geoff Grewcock, was attempting to reform Barney by keeping him alone in a special cage listening to Radio 4. “At night he likes to sit on my shoulder and watch documentaries and the news as well,” he said, “so hopefully his vocabulary should become cleaner.” *Guardian*, *Metro*, 27 July 2005. **FT**207:20

TALKING FISH

The story goes that at 4pm on 28 January 2003, Luis Niveló – an Ecuadorean immigrant working as a fish-cutter at the Fish Market in New Square, New York, about 30 miles (48km) northwest of Manhattan – lifted a live 20lb (9kg) carp out of a box of iced-down fish and was about to club it in the head when it said something unintelligible. In shock, he fell among the slimy wooden packing crates that covered the floor. Then he ran into the front of the store screaming, “The fish is talking!” and pulled Zalmen Rosen away from the phone. Mr Rosen,



LEFT: The splendidly named Geoff Grewcock and Barney.

whose family owned the fish shop, was a member of the Skver sect of Hasidim. When he approached the fish he heard it speaking in Hebrew. “It said ‘Tzaruch shemirah’ and ‘Hasof bah’, which essentially means that everyone needs to account for themselves because the end is near,” he said. The fish commanded him to pray and to study the Torah and identified itself as the soul of a childless Canadian Hasid who had died a year earlier, identified by local gossips as Moshe Yehuda Geshtetener, who had come back to Earth to perform *tikkun* (healing). Geshtetener often bought carp at the shop for the Sabbath meals of poorer village residents. A third fish-cutter, Zalmen Moshe Rosenfeld, also bore witness to the piscine utterances. Overwhelmed, Mr Rosen accidentally cut his thumb with the knife he was carrying and was taken to hospital. The fish flopped off the counter, back into the carp box. Attempts to identify it were fruitless and it ended up in a packet of gefilte fish.

The story soon spread throughout the Hasidic world, inspiring heated debate and derisive jokes. A gefilte fish manufacturer considered changing his advertising slogan

on a local radio station to “Our fish speaks for itself”, but decided people would be offended. Some Hasidic sects believe that righteous people can be reincarnated as fish. “Two men do not dream the same dream,” said Abraham Spitz, a New Square resident. “It is very rare that God reminds people he exists in this modern world. But when he does, you cannot ignore it.” *Forward*,

Jewish Week, 14 Mar; *New York Times*, 15 Mar; *Observer*, 16 Mar 2003. **FT**171:8

● Perhaps as a welcome break from war news, British newspapers in 1945 featured the ‘Talking Trout of Watford’, said to be held in an aquarium in a large private house in or near Bushey. The fish allegedly conversed freely with onlookers. It was fond of singing ‘They Built the Ship Titanic’ and ‘The Wreck of the Hesperus’ “with a gleeful look on its face”. It was a keen Tory and when the Attlee Labour Government was elected in July 1945 it was heard to make dark predictions about “the end of the British Empire” and “Bolshevism run mad!”

A group of zoologists went to investigate this singular phenomenon. After spending several days in the house in Bushey, they were totally baffled. Obviously, they came to reveal a fraud of some kind, for instance by ventriloquism or a hidden microphone, but could find absolutely nothing amiss, despite great efforts. The ‘talking fish’ seems to have fallen from view around October 1945, and nothing more is known of it. *Watford Observer*, 27 Aug 1999. **FT**145:42

LONG ODDS

● Laura Buxton, 10, released a gold-and-white helium-filled balloon during family celebrations for her grandparents' golden wedding anniversary at her home in Blurton, Staffordshire, in June 2001. Her grandfather Terry suggested she attach a luggage tag with her name and address and a note asking the finder to write back.

Ten days later a reply arrived at her home from another Laura Buxton, who had found the balloon in the garden hedge of her home in Pewsey, Wiltshire, 140 miles (225km) away on 14 June. Both Lauras were aged 10 and both had three-year-old black Labradors, a guinea pig

and a rabbit. "I chatted to Laura on the phone," said the Staffordshire Laura. "I hope we can become best friends. We have lots in common." *D.Mail*, 28 June 2001. FT152:10

Note: years later they are still best of friends

● And here's a classic yarn: early in 1934, a young attorney named Whitney Dillon was staying in Room 1242 at the Brown Palace Hotel, Denver. One night he went to bed before midnight, only to be roused at about one by the rattle of a key in his bedroom door. He got up and went to the door and called, "Who's that?"

"It's Mr Dillon," said a man outside. "No, it isn't," said Mr Dillon. "This is Mr Dillon." The man went away without replying. Presently the room clerk phoned and our man answered. "Mr Dillon is down here and wants to get in his room," the clerk said. "I am Mr Dillon," said our man firmly. "But Mr Dillon is down here," said the clerk, "and he has the key to 1242." Mr Dillon got dressed and went downstairs. "My name is Dillon," said the other man, "and you have my room." He showed his key. Mr Dillon looked at it. "But that's for the Cosmopolitan Hotel, across the street," he said. And sure enough it was. *"The Talk of the Town", New Yorker*, 3 Feb 1934. FT210:8



ABOVE LEFT: Laura Buxton, 10, from Staffordshire (left) and Laura Buxton, 10, from Wiltshire (right). ABOVE RIGHT: Denver's Brown Palace Hotel.

CASPIAN MERMAN

The crew of the *Baku*, an Azeri trawler in the Caspian Sea, had a strange encounter with an amphibious humanoid in March 2005. "The creature swam alongside the boat for a long time," said the captain, Gafar Gasanof, quoted in the Iranian newspaper *Zindagi*. "At first we thought it was a big fish, but then we spotted head hair and pretty strange looking fins... and the front part of his body had arms." Following publication, readers wrote to *Zindagi* pointing out that, since offshore oil drilling had intensified in the Caspian over the previous two years, many Iranian and Azeri fishermen had repeatedly seen the strange creature at sea and on the southern and southwestern shores – for instance in May 2004 between the Azeri towns of Astara and Lenkoran – and that the number of sightings had increased since the seabed volcanoes in the area of Babolsera had come to life in February. Experienced fishermen, presumably, would not mistake ordinary aquatic mammals for merfolk, which is the sceptics' traditional ploy for explaining away for such sightings.

Witnesses agreed that the merman was about 6ft 5in (165cm) tall, strongly built, with skin "the colour of moonlight", black or green hair, large round eyes, a protruding

ctenoid (comb-shaped) stomach, walrus-like feet, and four-fingered, webbed hands. His arms and legs were shorter and heavier than those of a human of medium build. Apart from his fingernails, he had nails growing on the tip of his aquiline nose that resembled a dolphin's beak. He had a fairly large mouth, jutting jaw but no chin, and "his lower lip flows smoothly into the neck".

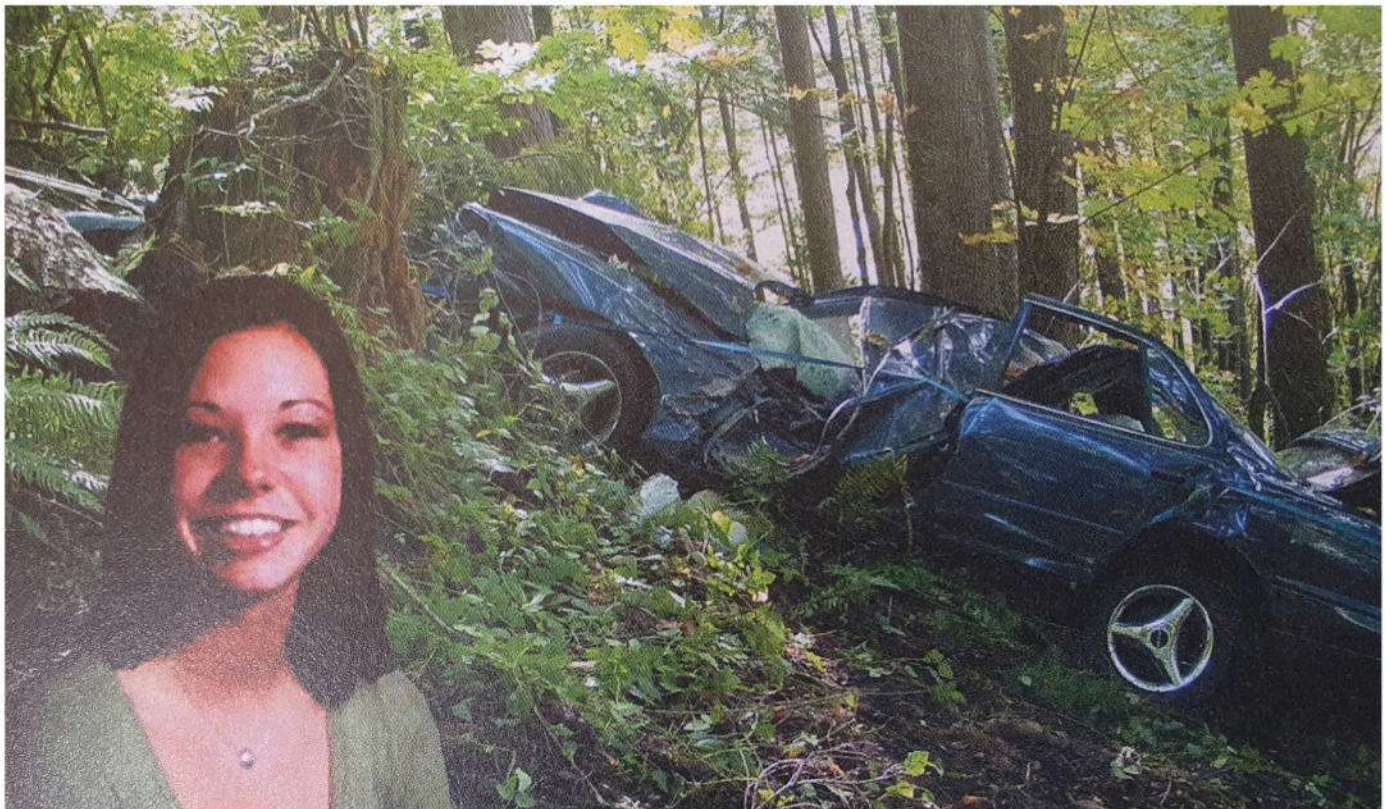
Iranians have dubbed the merman Runan-shah or "the master of the sea and rivers". The name is based partly on stories about large shoals of fish accompanying the merman at sea. Other stories refer to the waters turning crystal clear and remaining that way for two or three days after the creature was seen swimming in those areas. Fish were reported producing a faint gurgling sound as the merman came near. He was said to answer the call of the catch by making similar throaty sounds. Some say Runan-shah and his family were on a mission to tackle the Caspian's environmental problems resulting from the oil drilling and volcanic activity. The Astrakhan fishermen had long complained about a decrease in the stock of sturgeon, the total disappearance of sprat and the like.

Both Herodotus and Plato believed that humans were once amphibious and might have founded an underwater state. (This

resonates with the aquatic theory of human evolution, propounded by Prof Alister Hardy and Elaine Morgan.) There's also a theory that hiccups are a remnant of the time when humans had both lungs and gills. A book of collected scientific articles titled *The Universe and Humankind* (St Petersburg, 1905) contains an account of a "marine female" caught in the Caribbean and tales of dead amphibious humans washed ashore in the Azores in 1876. An amphibious humanoid was repeatedly seen in Vedlozero Lake, Karelia, in 1928. Researchers from Petrozavodsk University went to investigate, but their findings were classified and the researchers perished in the Gulag. Many accounts of merfolk are given in *Lake Monster Traditions: a Cross-cultural Analysis* by Michael Meurger with Claude Gagnon (Fortean Times, 1988). *Pravda*, 28 Mar 2005. FT197:14

BOY BECOMES YAM

Hundreds of curious people flocked to the police station in the northern Nigerian town of Maiduguri in Borno state on 22 March 2000 following radio reports that a local schoolboy had been turned by witchcraft into a large yam. Three pupils of the Evangelist Primary School rushed into the headmistress's office the previous morning and



ABOVE: In October 2004, Laura Hatch disappeared after going to a party; she was found over a week later, alive but trapped in a crashed car, by her friend's mother, who had dreamt repeatedly of a wooded location and felt an urge to investigate. **BELOW:** Police discover the Surrey 'ghost car' in which Christopher Chandler died.

said the boy, whose name was not given, had been transformed into the popular root tuber after accepting a sweet from a stranger. The headmistress went and found the tuber and took it to the local police station where it was being kept under guard by Divisional Police Officer Adamu Tukur, who said the sweet-giver was being sought. An official in the office of the governor, Mala Kachalla, confirmed that "there has been a mysterious incident here," but refused to provide details. [AFP] 23 Mar 2000. FT138:16

CAR CRASH VISIONS

Around 7pm on 11 December 2002, two motorists called police to report seeing a car veering off the A3 with its headlights blazing at Burpham, near Guildford in Surrey. At first nothing was found, but a more thorough search uncovered a wrecked maroon Vauxhall Astra nose-down in a ditch, concealed by dense undergrowth 20 yards (18m) from where the car had been reported leaving the southbound lanes of the busy dual carriageway. The lights were off – the car's battery had long since died – and the driver's body was badly decomposed.

Surrey police said they believed the crash happened five months earlier. The driver, who appeared to have been trying to escape from the wreck, was identified as Christopher Chandler, 21, from Isleworth, who was being hunted for an alleged robbery. He had been reported missing by his brother after last being seen in London on 16 July. Had the witnesses to the supposed crash seen a ghostly re-enactment of the original

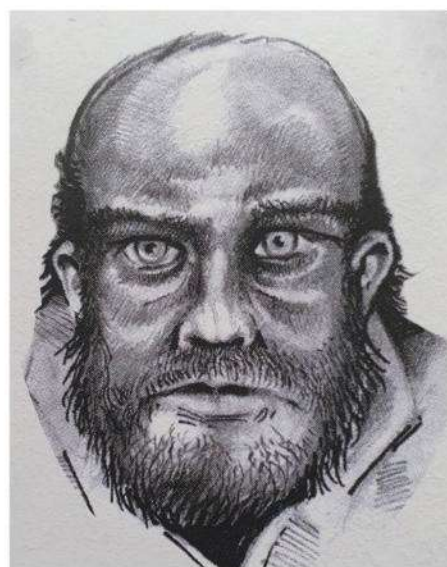
accident? *London Eve. Standard*, 12+13 Dec; *D.Mail, Sun*, 13 Dec 2002. FT168:26

● Laura Hatch, 17, disappeared after attending a party in Redmond, a suburb of Seattle in Washington State, on 2 October 2004. Local police at first assumed she was a runaway and were slow to mount a search; but her parents hired a private investigator, held prayer vigils at Creekside Covenant Church and organised a search with 200 volunteers. Sha Nohr, mother of Laura's close friend Beth Anne Nohr, had several dreams of a wooded area and heard the message: "Keep going, keep going." On 10

October, she asked her daughter to help her look for Laura. They drove around an area called Union Hill and stopped several times. Ms Nohr eventually pulled over by a crash barrier and felt an urge to climb down the hill. It was then that she spotted the Hatch family's crumpled 1996 Toyota, 200ft (60m) down a wooded embankment.

Ms Nohr and her daughter flagged down a passing motorist, who helped them to climb further down the hill through thick vegetation to reach Laura. "As we tried to get close enough to read the licence plate," said Ms Nohr, "we knocked down a fallen branch and it banged on the roof of the car.





ABOVE LEFT: Jim and Muriel Wilson's father makes a post mortem postcard appearance. ABOVE RIGHT: An artist's impression of the Greenock Catman.

Unbelievably, Laura hollered out. She was alive!" She was convinced she had been led to Laura by a "vision from God". Laura had either climbed or been forced into the back seat by the crash. Her first words were: "I'm going to be late for curfew."

She was taken to Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, where she was treated for dehydration, a blood clot on the brain and fractures to her leg, ribs and face. The dehydration contributed to her survival by keeping the blood clot from expanding in her brain. She had no memory of the accident, or of the hours preceding it. "We had already given her up and let her be dead in our hearts," Jean Hatch, Laura's mother, told local television. (*London Times*, (Sydney) *Daily Telegraph*, 13 Oct; *D.Mirror*, 14 Oct; *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 Oct 2004. **FT192:22**)

POSTCARD FAREWELL

When Jim Wilson's father died in Natal, South Africa, in April 1967, both Jim, living in Lancashire, and his sister Muriel, living in Holland, were informed. Muriel contacted her husband, Martin Van Den Hurk, who was on business in Portugal, and he flew to South Africa right away. Changing planes at Las Palmas airport in the Canary Islands, he bought an SA Airways postcard showing holidaymakers on the beach in Margate, Natal, and sent it to Muriel. It was she who noticed that the photograph showed her father, dressed in white jacket and grey slacks, walking up the beach. **FT144:52**

BEWARE THE CATMAN!

A rumour has long been extant in the Scottish seaside town of Greenock. People said a weird recluse emerged from his lair on all fours at night to hunt with a pack of feral cats. Allegedly he came ashore from a ship and lived on rats, milk and cat food, and grunted instead of speaking. Police were said to have joined the hunt "in a bid to

solve the riddle once and for all".

Dozens of people said they had spotted Catman during the 1980s and 1990s, describing him as balding and middle-aged. "I'd heard stories of Catman, but thought they were hearsay," said garage boss Robert Wilson, 46, owner of Wilson's bus garage. "Then one night cops said they'd caught an intruder behind the garage. They were going to take him in. But I realised who it was and felt sorry for him, so I told them he had permission to be there and they let him go. He disappeared into waste-ground behind the forecourt." In the first few weeks of 2000, there was a flurry of sightings in a scrapyard behind the bus garage. The police raided the yard with torches in mid-February, but drew a blank.

Robert Wilson's son Ross, 13, showed reporters a disused industrial pipe behind the garage where he claims Catman slept. It had a bed made out of old sheets and carpet and was littered with milk cartons and food scraps. "When I first saw Catman close up he was moving about on all fours, dressed in rags and had a rat gripped in his mouth. His face was covered in engine oil and all you could see were the whites of his eyes." *News of the World*, 13 Feb 2000. **FT134:22**

SPRINGHEELED JUAN

In March 2005, rumours of a weird acrobatic intruder reminiscent of India's protean "Monkey Man" or *muhnochwa* ("face scratcher") in 2001-02, were rife in Santa Fe, a large city in Argentina, 250 miles (400km) northwest of Buenos Aires. The entity, dubbed *el Loco Tejado* (Rooftop Madman), was similar to Spring-heeled Jack of Victorian London and the hero Nightcrawler in *X-Men* comics. For brevity, we'll call him Roofman. Eyewitnesses claimed he had glowing red eyes, although he never showed his face. He stood 2m (6ft 6in) tall, had long wavy hair, dressed entirely in black and wore a cape and a balaclava. He had been seen scaling sheer walls or

leaping from one darkened rooftop to another. These phenomenal leaps were up to 5m (16ft) high and 10m (33ft) long. He howled like a beast or cried like a child as he danced on the rooftops. A resident of the El Arenal district claimed to have fired 17 times at Roofman without the bullets having the least effect.

Fearful residents locked themselves in at night while others roamed the streets armed with machetes, clubs, sticks and knives. During heavy rain on 28 February, Roofman jammed the door of a car containing seven armed vigilantes ready to hunt him down. One woman claimed he had pointed at her and left her paralysed. On 1 March, a hairstylist called Elsa, whose salon was in the San Lorenzo district, screamed and ran into the street. While she was bathing her youngest nephew, she said, Roofman had pressed his face against the bathroom window, showing his claws menacingly. In an interview with the newspaper *El Litoral*, Elsa's neighbour Ruben said: "How can you explain that he can leap across the street in a single bound, like the way he crossed Entre Rios Street, unless he were the Devil himself? How can you explain why we couldn't catch him, when we shot him three times and hit him twice?"

"In recent days, we have received hundreds of reports," said Sheriff Gabriel Legstra on 4 March. On Tuesday [1 March] I dispatched 18 units [police cars] to assuage people's fears; but really, the only crime involved is trespassing... [he] hasn't attacked anyone." Legstra added that none of his officers had seen Roofman, but that he had reportedly been sighted at three different locations at the same time. Legstra blamed what has been translated as "generalised psychosis"; more familiar labels would be "mass hysteria" or "mass psychogenic illness". *La Capital*, *El Litoral*, 2 Mar; *Litoral del Dia* (all Argentinian papers) 4 Mar 2005. **FT198:4**



SHERI SLOAN

STUCK UP TREES

New York stockbroker Gerald Inman is a member of the Falcon Gun & Rod Club, which has a 900-acre estate near Hancock, Delaware County, New York. On 18 November 2002, the opening day of the deer shooting season, he became lost and disoriented in a snowstorm on the club's land in the remote, hilly and heavily wooded southwestern corner of Delaware County near the Pennsylvania border. Inman spotted a dark form high in a tree in the white landscape. (It had been snowing for a couple of days.) At first he thought it was a giant nest, but getting closer he found a dead deer wedged between two branches of a maple tree at least 12ft (3.6m) off the ground. There were no signs of blood or struggle and no footprints apart from his own.

He eventually found his way back to the hunting lodge and told his bizarre tale. "Everybody laughed at me and thought I'd been drinking," he said. His friend and fellow club member, Jim Hudgins, a securities trader in Manhattan, hunted the acreage for three weekends until he spotted the deer in the tree on 7 December. He took photographs and marked the area with orange tape.

Hudgins, Inman and Scott Van Arsdale, a wildlife technician for 18 years with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, returned with a ladder on 13 December and hiked over rugged terrain from Route 97, the nearest road, to investigate. The deer was wedged so tightly they couldn't budge it from the tree crotch. One of the hunters returned to the lodge for an axe. They chopped down the maple, pulled out the deer with great difficulty and brought it to state wildlife pathologist Ward Stone at his laboratory in Delmar.

Stone's necropsy determined the 71lb (32kg) male fawn, known as a button

buck, had been in good health (apart from a swollen front foot) until it was legally killed with an arrow that penetrated its lung and heart. The arrow was missing and had likely passed straight through the animal. The rest of the case remains a mystery. "There was no evidence that it had been carried up into the tree by a scavenging bear or mountain lion," said Stone. "A young deer could not jump 12 feet in the air, especially after it had an arrow through its heart." He was certain the deer – which had not been gutted or otherwise disturbed – was hauled up into the tree by human force, probably with the aid of ropes. "I have no idea why someone would do that. Maybe they were going to come back for it later and wanted to keep it safe from coyotes. I've seen just about everything with deer, but nothing like this."

Van Arsdale said there was no sign that there had been a hunter's stand in the tree or that climbing spikes had been used. He discovered claw marks on the bark of the tree, but couldn't determine the species. "There are quite a few bear in that area, and a bear could have smelled the deer carcass and climbed up to check it out, I suppose," he said. He didn't discount the possibility of a mountain lion until Stone's post mortem report came through. "A big cat crossed my mind and a lot of other people's," he said.

Large cats, especially jaguars and leopards, will drag prey high up into trees to feed on their kill. It was suggested that a large exotic cat, possibly from a circus or from a private owner, escaped in the Catskills and dragged the dead deer up into the tree out of instinct. Stone adamantly opposed such conjecture. "There were no fresh bites and no animal dragged it up there," he said. After interviewing their fellow club members, all of whom denied killing the deer, the hunters remain perplexed. "It took four men to dis-



JIM HUDGINS

LEFT: The huge sandstone boulder discovered stuck up a tree in 1997 and christened "Gobbler's Rock".
ABOVE: The deer wedged 12ft up in the crotch of a maple tree found by a lost hunter in November 2002.



ABOVE: Relatives of Kashmiri earthquake survivor Naqsha Bibi watch her as she lies on a hospital bed; she was rescued after being buried under rubble for 63 days.

TARIQ MAHMOOD / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

lodge that deer after we cut down the tree,” said Hudgins. “The whole thing just mystifies me.” *Albany (NY) Times Union*, 23 Dec 2002. **FT172:20**

● In April 1997, a huge sandstone rock, estimated to weigh 500lb (227kg), was found wedged between three branches of an oak tree about 35ft (11m) from the ground in Yellowwood State Forest, Brown County, Indiana. It became known as ‘Gobbler Rock’ because the man who found it was out hunting turkeys in the 23,000-acre forest. **[FT115:21]**

Since then, more have been found. About five miles (8km) away, on the banks of Plum Creek, sandstone boulders appearing to weigh about 200lb (90kg) are wedged in the upper branches of two tall sycamores 300ft (90m) apart. One boulder is nearly 45ft (14m) off the ground. And Carol Carr, 58, from Edinburgh, found another two boulders wedged in trees on a ridge near Yellowwood Lake.

Explanations proposed include engineering students working on a class project, tornadoes, floods, dynamite demolition gone awry, or UFOs. The boulder-topped trees are up to a half a mile from the nearest road, in remote areas of the state forest, miles apart. There’s no apparent reason why the locations were picked, no damage to the trees, and no signs of any type of heavy equipment having been used to hoist the heavy rocks. There’s no sign of wind damage to surrounding trees, and no one remembers any mishaps involving dynamite anywhere nearby. *Indianapolis Star*, 4 April 2003. **FT172:20**

QUAKE SURVIVOR

A Himalayan earthquake on 8 October 2005 killed at least 73,000 and left about 3.5 million homeless. Sixty-three days after the quake, Naqsha Bibi, 40, was found alive in what had been her kitchen. She had migrated from Kupwara in Indian Kashmir in the early 1990s with thousands of others and had been living since then in the Kamscar refugee camp, which was destroyed in the quake. Locals were digging into the rubble at the camp on 10 December to recover corrugated iron sheets and belongings when they saw the woman, whom they initially thought to be dead. Her relatives had assumed that she had either been swept away to her death in a river by a landslide or had found shelter at a relief camp. She weighed less than 70lb (32kg) and 80 per cent of her muscles had withered while she was trapped in a tiny space in which she could only crouch. She had apparently survived on rainwater and rotting food. She was put on a liquid diet in Muzaffarabad hospital and two days after her rescue smiled for the first time – although she was still incapable of speech. *Times*, 18 Nov; *D.Telegraph*, 14 Dec; [AFP] 16 Dec 2005. **FT207:8**

THE ODD COUPLE

At the time of the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the last two Jews left in the country hated each other with a vengeance. Ishaq (or Yitzhak) Levi and Zebolan (or Zebulon) Simantov were the sole survivors of a community that had been in the

country for 1,300 years and had numbered as many as 40,000 in the late 19th century. About 5,000 Jews left the country after the creation of Israel in 1948, with others leaving after the 1979 Soviet invasion.

Levi and Simantov hailed from Herat and lived in a building in Kabul’s Flower Street that locals called the “Jewish mosque”, sharing a soot-blackened kitchen. They carried on a bitter feud, denouncing each other to the Taliban authorities as Israeli spies, resulting in both being arrested repeatedly. Each looked after his own crumbling synagogue, from which the other was banned – but the last prayers to be said in synagogue in Kabul were in 1990. The *casus belli* was the last Torah – a scroll containing the Pentateuch – in Afghanistan, written on deer hide 500 years ago and wrapped in silk. After their mutual denunciations, this was seized by the Taliban. We are not told what happened to it. Levi, aged about 80, died in mid-January 2005. “He was mad,” said Simantov, 45, a carpet salesman. “He was a magician and I am a businessman.” Levi seemed to scrape a living as a fortune-teller and palmist. *NY Post*, 27 Nov; *Irish Times*, 3 Dec; *D.Telegraph*, 4 Dec 2001; *Guardian Weekend*, 5 Jan 2002. [AP] *BBC News*, 25 Jan; *Irish Times*, 27 Jan 2005. **FT156:22, 197:24**

In next month’s ‘Tales from the New Millennium’: Alaskan monster bird, football with legs, fish falls, Yowie vs campervan, lioness befriends oryx, reincarnated airman and much more.



FORTEAN TIMES #57, SPRING 1991

SATAN AND THE SOCIAL WORKERS

In the first of a series presenting long-out-of-print articles from the FT archive we present a ground-breaking analysis by **MIKE DASH** of the Satanic ritual abuse scare that gripped the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s and saw children taken from their homes by social workers in the grip of an Evangelical-fuelled panic.

January 20, 1988: Carl, four, a Nottingham kid in care, confides in his foster mother. He describes being sexually abused by his uncles and aunts, and recalls his attackers wiping blood from him with a tissue. He also describes the circumstances of the attack. "You walk around bonfire saying witching, witching, witching, when they splash you with water, you stronger, can't get burnt. Them witches, them have sheep, them kill sheep. Them put worms in our hair, them witches go magic, magic, magic."

Similar accounts have been reported from other children taken into care in Nottingham, Rochdale, Kent, Manchester and the Orkney islands, of alleged abuse in the course of a magical ceremony labelled variously as Satanic ritual abuse or Satanic child abuse (SCA).

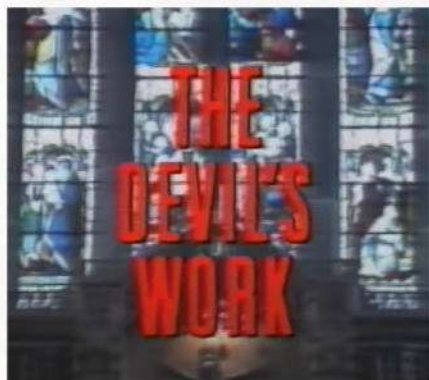
BACKGROUND TO A PANIC

The idea that organised groups of demonically-inspired child molesters are systematically abusing children and performing rituals either as an act of worship or simply to heighten their own sexual pleasure, seems outlandish. Yet – despite a total lack of evidence of ritual abuse – several factors helped convince social workers and sometimes police that the phenomenon was genuine.

The Cleveland scandal in 1987 involved 121 cases of sexual abuse of children diagnosed in a period of a few months. Although the enquiry by Lord Justice Butler-Sloss ended with the collapse of the prosecution case and the general discrediting of the paediatricians involved, it brought the subject of widespread child abuse to public notice for the first time.

Cases of alleged ritual Satanic abuse from the United States – including the McMartin Pre-school trial and the story of Michelle, the 'reformed Satanist' saved by her psychiatrist – were publicised in the UK from 1988 thanks to contacts between social workers and the activities of at least three British fundamentalist Christian groups.

The threat of ritual abuse was raised in the



DICKENS ALLEGED THAT UP TO 50 YOUNG CHILDREN WERE BEING MURDERED OR SACRIFICED BY OCCULT GROUPS EACH YEAR



LEFT: A June 1989 edition of The Cook Report may have helped stoke the growing paranoia about Satanic Ritual Abuse. **BELOW:** Tory MP Geoffrey Dickens made unsubstantiated claims about child sacrifices by occult groups.

House of Commons by 'Rent-a-Quote' Tory MP and child abuse campaigner Geoffrey Dickens in April and September 1988. After making unsubstantiated allegations about the prevalence of SCA, he said he would forward a dossier on the subject to the Home Office. Dickens alleged – seemingly prompted by contact with Christian groups – that up to 50 young children were being murdered or sacrificed by occult groups each year; that drugs were administered to victims who were then forced to conduct perverted sexual acts; and that tombs were being desecrated and corpses mutilated and dismembered. Pædophiles were turning to occult groups "to get their hands on children who are too terrified to talk," he said. His proof? Letters from witches in every corner of the UK, warnings from librarians of increased demand for occult books, a boom in the distribution of videos featuring black magic themes, and an alleged increase in the number of shops selling witchcraft regalia.

Dickens's crusade, which was fairly widely reported in the papers, seems to have been one of the spurs that influenced the well-known radio and TV campaigner Roger Cook to compile a special *Cook Report* on Satanism that aired on national television on 17 July 1989. Heavily criticised at the time for its melodramatic presentation and unconfirmed reports of the most unlikely practices, the publicity Cook attracted may have done much to stoke the paranoia that led to one of the most persistent, widest-ranging social terrors ever experienced in the UK in modern times.

KENT

A 1988 Kent case appears to have been the first in which Satanic ritual abuse was diagnosed by social workers. A two-year-old

boy showed signs of disturbed behaviour; he laughed hysterically, insisted on taking his clothes off, and told of taking strange drinks that made him feel funny. He was interviewed by Norma Howes, an independent social worker from the Reading area. The reasons why local social services did not handle the case themselves have not been publicised.

The case was only one of nine recent Kent abuse cases involving a total of 75 children and 17 adults, but on this occasion Howes chose to call in Pamela Klein, an American who specialised in child abuse and had been instrumental in publicising SCA in the States. Klein supplied a list of 'Satanic indicators', compiled by an American, Dr Catherine Gould, who belongs to a pressure group called Believe the Children (*Independent on Sunday*, 14 April 1990). These indicators were used to diagnose ritual abuse. SCA victims, they said, often exhibit aggressive play activities and an unusual preoccupation with excreta and farting; and a fear of ghosts, leading to nightmares and bed-wetting. As a diagnostic tool, the indicators appear – from press reports at least – to be worse than useless, yet from their first appearance in the Kent case, they were widely circulated among British social workers and played a key role in the diagnosis of SCA in Nottingham, Rochdale and Manchester.

As the first UK incident to attract interest, the Kent case received little publicity and we do not know how it turned out. It seems safe to assume, however, that court-room proof of ritual abuse would have been reported.

MANCHESTER

Two sisters aged seven and four, taken into care in Manchester during the autumn of 1989, were questioned several times by social workers checking reports of abuse. After three months they began to tell stories of witches and seemingly Satanic rituals, prompting the authorities to take a further 11 children into custody.

The children's allegations were more detailed and much more alarming than those made by the Kent boy, involving as they did descriptions of black magic ceremonies, animal sacrifice, baby killing and blood-drinking. Yet despite a police investigation, no charges relating to ritual abuse were ever laid. One adult, charged with indecent assault, was released for lack of evidence.

Investigation of eight of the 13 children was abandoned that December and local authorities accepted criticism of their methods made by a High Court judge. But all 13 remained wards of court, and five were still in care in January.

ROCHDALE

The Rochdale ritual abuse scare was the largest yet seen in the UK, involving 20 children taken into care over a six month period after investigations by NSPCC and local social



workers.

The investigation began in November 1989 when a six-year-old boy was found hiding in a school cupboard by his headmaster. Although the boy – described in a number of papers as retarded and dyslexic, with a history of speech difficulties – appears in retrospect to have been a poor witness, two female social workers – both of whom had already “done some reading on Satanic ritual child abuse” – assigned to the case in February decided he was telling the truth.

Questioned, the boy talked of ghosts named Jim and Bob and told investigators he had stabbed “little babies and big babies”, been held prisoner in wooden cages by his own family and helped to dig up graves to bury other infants. He was taken from his home by an entity which opened his bedroom window and given a (hallucinogenic?) liquid like fizzy tea. When he drank it, the man who had given it to him grew to be over nine feet tall.

Almost immediately, all four children in the family were taken into care. Although medical examinations disclosed no evi-

LEFT: The Langley Housing Estate in Rochdale was the centre of a major ritual abuse scare in 1989-1990. **BELOW:** Eight of the children taken from their homes in Rochdale by social workers, police and the NSPCC in June 1990.

dence of sexual abuse, the social workers investigating the case soon discovered evidence that the parents, both of whom were regarded as educationally subnormal, had an interest in the occult that must have been conveyed to the children. In 1985 they had complained their home on the Langley housing estate outside Rochdale was haunted and a priest was asked to bless the premises, after which the haunting stopped.

In six weeks of interviews, the boy's 11-year-old sister corroborated his story, saying she saw the alleged abuse “in dreams”. The children's allegations led to 12 more infants from four families being taken into care in a series of dawn raids on 14 June, a single child being taken later the same month and three from a single family seized on 7 September. Five were later returned to their parents; two of the nine boys and three girls held subsequently escaped and allegedly complained to relatives of repeated questioning by the authorities.

Local councillors were told late in July that inquiries centred on sexual abuse in the course of ritualistic practices, but doubts seem to have set in as the investigation proceeded. On 10 September, Gordon Littlemore, Rochdale's head of social services, made no mention of SCA when explaining: “We are dealing with allegations of emotional abuse, degradation, humiliation, the administration of drugs and exposure to acts of violence which would not necessarily result in physical injury.” Three days later, Manchester chief constable James Anderson – himself a well-known fundamentalist Christian – said that three months of police investigations had turned up no evidence justifying criminal action.



KEITH PANNELL / MAIL ON SUNDAY / SHUTTERSTOCK



EXPLORING 50 YEARS OF FORTEAN TIMES

The local authorities were certainly quick to suggest that Rochdale was far from unique. Organised networks were abusing children up and down the country, they alleged. Norma Howes, who had resigned her position as a social worker to become a consultant in child abuse and a member of RAINS, the Ritual Abuse Information Network, told the *Observer* (16 Sept 1990) she had investigated 18 cases of ritual abuse involving 33 children in the southeast alone between 1987 and 1990. Peter Biddy of Brent social services told the same paper that a total of 50 groups had been reported to him in a year, many abusing up to 30 children and some drawing in hundreds of child victims.

The problem with all this was an almost total lack of evidence to back up the allegations. Police investigations turned up no proof that abuse of any description had taken place in 17 of the 20 UK cases (three families remained under investigation). In November 1990, a team of government inspectors reported that the social services' investigations had been unsatisfactory in many respects, and charged local social workers with failing to involve parents in decisions that affected their children. In December, with a minimum of publicity, allegations of Satanic abuse in Rochdale were dropped, although the social services continued to insist the children were suffering from neglect and suggested that the 'fantasies' were drug-induced.

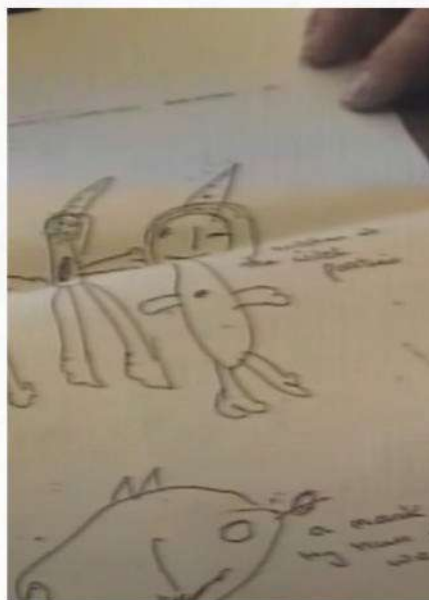
The denouement came in March, when 10 of the 14 children still in care were returned home after a 47-day court hearing. Delivering his judgement, Mr Justice Brown openly criticised the social workers for shoddy questioning, failure to videotape key interviews or to read the Butler-Sloss report on the Cleveland case, which contained recommendations for handling cases of suspected abuse.

The frailty of the evidence assembled by the social services was ruthlessly exposed. One boy who claimed to have eaten a cat seems to have been referring to a bowl of soup containing pasta animal shapes. Another, who told of watching 'The Black Master of Huddersfield' stab a man to death and drive off in a black Ford Escort admitted other members of his family had failed to see the mystery figure because they were "at the chip shop" when he appeared. Evidence was presented to show that the six-year-old whose stories sparked the scare had watched the explicit horror film *The Evil Dead* twice on the night before he was first interviewed; regular showings of so-called 'video nasties' seem to have been common in the household. The boy's enjoyment of the attention lavished on him by investigators also became apparent; at one point he piped up: "If there's anything else you'd like to know, just ask me."



ABOVE: The entrance to the tunnels in Nottingham's Rock Cemetery where it was alleged children were taken and abused. BELOW: Drawings by some of the Nottingham children were adduced as evidence of SRA.

THE DOCUMENTARY CLAIMED THAT CHILDREN HAD BEEN TAKEN TO UNDERGROUND TUNNELS IN THE CEMETERY



Although the original charges had been utterly discredited, forcing Littlemore's resignation the day after the High Court hearing ended, allegations of neglect seem to have been partially upheld. The boy who started the scare, his sister and two brothers remained in care after the others were returned to their families. Mr Justice Brown ordered a review of their case for later in 1991.

NOTTINGHAM

The only UK 'Satanic' abuse case that actually resulted in convictions occurred in Nottingham, where a serious case of multiple child abuse occurred during 'sex parties' in the Broxtowe area during the mid 1980s. Police investigation of a ring of eight adults from a single family plus one family friend revealed an appalling catalogue of perversity involving up to 27 children, none over the age of eight, and resulted in jail sentences totalling 43 years being handed down in February 1989.

It was not until months after the trials concluded and the abusers (none of whom have ever been named in the press) were jailed that the Nottingham case gained an additional dimension with the publicising of allegations of ritual abuse involving not just the children in the Broxtowe case but a further 27 children – stories so bizarre social workers said the prosecution had hushed them up in its anxiety to secure convictions in the case.

The allegations came from some of the foster parents entrusted with the care of children involved in the case. They had begun meeting at the request of police to compare notes on what the children were saying – but instead of unearthing the names of other adults involved in the crimes, they began to record details of rituals the children claimed had occurred in the area.

There were descriptions of ceremonies conducted in tunnels under a local cemetery in Nottingham's red light district, in large houses with swimming pools and four-poster beds, and in the cellars of Wollaton Hall. Some children spoke of seeing babies killed and their bodies put into bags, of being forced to eat excrement and of photos taken of the rituals; others told of animal sacrifice,

blood-drinking and branding with burning sticks. One girl described adults dressed as lions, and an eight-year-old boy told of others dressing up as wizards, clowns and devils.

Police mounted an investigation of the allegations, which were later dismissed for lack of evidence. But the story was far from over. News of growing differences of opinion between the social workers and the police reached journalists in the national and trade press. *Community Care* published an article by investigators Judith Dawson and Chris Johnston, describing "children being passed around adults... made to stand in circles, being orally and anally penetrated by adults in strange costumes. They were forced to eat excreta, drinking blood from animals that were sacrificed in front of them."

Continued agitation led to the screening of a documentary made by Beatrix Campbell and shown in Channel 4's *Dispatches* series on 3 October 1990. It publicised claims that children involved in the case had been taken to underground tunnels in Nottingham's Rock cemetery and forced to participate in bizarre rituals. (One woman, a prosecution witness at the earlier sex abuse trial, said sacrificial victims had been buried in existing graves in the cemetery.) None of the children appeared on film, but the *Dispatches* team's credibility was bolstered by the apparent discovery of a series of locked-up tunnels in the graveyard, some of them containing what appeared to be ritual items including candles and torches, and a niche (said to be an altar) with an 18-inch cross carved into a wall, and possible 'Satanic' symbols such as a wire circle containing six stars.

Police and council officials were severely embarrassed by Channel 4's report, especially the revelation that a sex contact magazine, a dildo, and advice on local fostering were found in the cemetery lodge. It suggested that the authorities had done little to prevent rituals occurring practically under their noses. An investigation of the claims was ordered.

In the event, no evidence was produced to support the children's stories. Re-examination of some of the young witnesses suggested that the cemetery had been drawn to their attention by worried foster parents. No physical traces of alleged Satanic rituals, beyond those already discovered by the TV crew, were unearthed. The council said it was confident that neither the catacombs (that predated the cemetery and had been opened up by the Victorians for leisure use) nor Wollaton Hall (in daily use as the town's natural history museum) were being used illegally. A leader in the Nottingham *Evening Post* (4 Oct 1990) pointed out that "just about everybody in the city is familiar with those tunnels under the Hall... Similarly, the well-known caves of the Rock cemetery..."

A lengthy statement by Notts chief constable Dan Crompton underlined the friction between the initially sceptical police and social services, who, he said, promoted "the orthodoxy of belief that a child's disclosures must be accepted as evidence of fact, and disclosures taken literally." Defending the police's need for something more substantial than unsupported stories, he said: "Surely standards of evidence gathering, investigation and presentation have to be maintained if we are not to revert to the 'ducking stool' form of justice."

David White, the director of the local social services, said that social workers were now encountering difficulties in obtaining care orders for the children involved in the cemetery case because of police reluctance to assist them. In a 21-page report, White said he found it hard to believe that the stories recorded by the children's foster parents were simply fantasies. Social services accepted that firm proof to support the allegations had not been found, but the children deserved to be taken seriously. "Children are abused in all kinds of ways, and some of those ways may include ritualistic practices."

Social workers from Team Four, the nine-strong group that had investigated the allegations, had their own worries, having spoken to the press in defiance of a ban imposed by David White. Acting senior social worker Jane McDermott said: "We are aware that we might lose our jobs. This is a matter of principle, of protecting children."

ORKNEY

In one of the most publicised SCA episodes, Scottish social workers removed a total of 17 children from families on the island of South Ronaldsay to 'places of safety' in two phases.

The incident centred on "a large and notoriously unruly local family" (*D. Telegraph*, 5 April 1991), the father of which had been

sentenced to prison, in 1989, for sexually abusing a daughter. The mother was befriended and supported by the four 'white settler' families (a local term for mainlanders who move to the islands) involved in the allegations, and all their children played and went to school together. At school, a daughter of the local family (described as disturbed by the family crisis) began to talk of chanting and dancing in robes around a small quarry and sex between children and adults. The stories were taken seriously and eight children from that family were taken from school by social workers in November 1990.

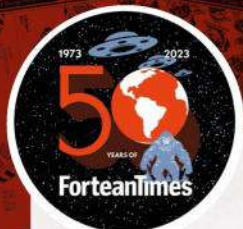
Interviewed repeatedly during the controversial 'disclosure therapy' sessions, the girls implicated their playmates and their parents and even the local Presbyterian minister Morris McKenzie, aged 68 and suffering from angina. Nine children from the four neighbouring families were taken in dawn raids in February 1991.

Police said they had removed a number of items from the homes they had searched, including a Nepalese sculpture of a couple making love, life jackets, a *Blackadder* video, Hallowe'en masks and a relaxation tape, and from the minister's home his academic robes. Social workers alleged that the children and their parents dressed in black or white robes and took part in night-time ceremonies involving "lewd and libidinous activities" between the months of June and November. During the rituals, it was alleged, the Reverend McKenzie would strip off and repeatedly have intercourse with the children.

Locals ridiculed the allegations. One parent told the *Mail on Sunday* (3 Mar 1991): "The idea of someone stripping off at night in November in the Orkneys is idiotic, but for a minister in his sixties with a serious heart condition - well, it is ludicrous." Others suggested that a church conference on Satanism, held in Aberdeen in November



ABOVE: A social worker in the Orkney investigation, which saw 17 children removed from their parental homes in dawn raids, locks herself in her office after being confronted by angry parents.



EXPLORING 50 YEARS OF FORTEAN TIMES

and addressed by Maureen Davies of the Reachout Trust, might have influenced Orkney social workers. No representatives from the Orkneys attended the seminar.

After two appeals by the parents were rejected by the islands' Children's Panel, the whole case was dismissed as "fundamentally flawed" by Kirkwall's Sheriff David Kelbie on 4 April 1991. He condemned the dawn abductions as "totally illegal" and ordered the children released to their parents without delay. He further criticised the social workers' methods of interrogation as cajoling the children until they gave the answers they wanted to hear. However, the case rumbles on, even now, as social workers have placed some of the children on their 'at risk' register and are seeking to appeal Sheriff Kelbie's judgement.

It took little more than a month for the Orkney saga to collapse. The implosion of the Rochdale SCA case just as social workers moved to snatch children in Orkney utterly discredited allegations of ritual abuse in the islands, and it seems likely that SCA will never be taken seriously in the UK again.

ASSESSING THE TESTIMONY

Why has SCA been taken so seriously? The evidence for the existence of ritual abuse is not good. Little or no physical traces of it have been found. In four of the five main UK scares (the exception is Nottingham), a vast accumulation of allegations was erected on the dubious testimony of a single child. The police have always doubted there is cause for concern. Even the press, so often accused of propagating panics, has been level-headed and sceptical, supporting the parents rather than social workers, whose image as left-wing busybodies makes them ineligible for sympathy. Allegations of ritual abuse are hardly widespread; in December 1989, at the start of the scare, the National Committee on Child Abuse Networks reported that cases of ritual abuse made up only 10% of the reports on its book, and a survey of police forces conducted by the BBC programme *Public Eye* in March 1991 showed that less than 2.5% of reported instances of child sex abuse included allegations of ritual abuse. Only five cases of ritual or Satanic abuse feature on the police database of 186 cases of 'networked' abuse (i.e., involving groups of adults or groups of children).

Not all social workers involved in promoting the scare have been convinced that 'genuine' Satanism is involved; in public at least they prefer to speak of 'ritual abuse', defined as sexual abuse with a dimension of terror added to inhibit disclosure by the



LEFT: The quarry that social workers alleged was the location for ritual abuse. BELOW: Rev Morris Mackenzie was said to have stripped naked and had sex with the children.

HE CONDEMNED THE DAWN ABDUCTIONS AND ORDERED THE CHILDREN RELEASED TO THEIR PARENTS WITHOUT DELAY



young victims.

Yet official investigation suggested that social workers' techniques for questioning possible witnesses were flawed by a prior acceptance of the existence of SCA. Rochdale social workers were heavily criticised for inept and leading interview techniques, as were those in the Orkney case. Details leaked to the *Independent on Sunday* showed that children in Nottingham had been asked leading questions; in the Orkney case, the children were asked the same questions over and over again and their denials of any knowledge of Satanic rituals were brushed aside. One of the Orkney boys later said he had been offered a ride in a helicopter if he could name "who should be in the middle of the circle"

(*Scotland on Sunday*, 7 April 1991). The NSPCC's interview techniques were also criticised; Professor John Newson of Nottingham University's child development research unit said they were "tantamount to brainwashing".

The key role in convincing social workers of the reality of SCA seems to have been played by three tiny fundamentalist Christian groups forming the Evangelical Alliance. They believe implicitly in the existence of Satanism as a real force for evil, and can marshal an array of witnesses including adults who have allegedly been 'saved' from the clutches of Satanic abuse networks. With missionary fervour, they have organised seminars and conferences on SCA and co-ordinated the dissemination of the so-called 'Satanic indicators' used extensively and (apparently) uncritically by social workers and police. These groups, most notably the Reachout Trust (fronted by Maureen Davis, who has since left to form her own organisation), were certainly present in Nottingham, Rochdale, Congleton, Kent and Manchester, and may well have played a part in promoting other cases.

Alone, these groups might have had little impact. But they made converts among the ranks of social workers and child care groups, many if not all of which number active Christians among their members. And, somehow (neither side will speak publicly on the subject), evidence provided by Christian groups helped persuade the respected National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to make a public statement drawing attention to allegations of Satanic abuse.

The Society first warned police of the phenomenon as early as 1988, when the authorities investigated the Manchester case without finding concrete evidence for ritual abuse. The press was alerted, and literature on the subject originating with the Rev Kevin Logan and with Maureen Davis of the Reachout Trust was distributed by NSPCC workers, notably at a conference on SCA held in Reading in September 1989. By March 1990, seven of the NSPCC's 66 child protection teams were investigating cases of suspected SCA. By then, the Society was already involved in the National Committee on Child Abuse Networks, and it had assisted Rochdale, Nottingham and Manchester social services in their enquiries.

It was an NSPCC press conference in

March 1990 that attracted the attention of national media. As a charity commanding considerable public support, NSPCC officials – who sometimes manage ‘at risk’ registers for councils – lent their credibility to front-page headlines like “Children as young as five are being forced by devil-worshippers to join in vile sex orgies” (*D. Mirror*). The scale of the problem was if anything underestimated, it was announced; but allegations of human sacrifice were reported with little qualification, and stories of babies seen in freezers and microwave ovens circulated.

Director of child care Jim Harding confirmed the Society was taking the SCA scare seriously. “We believe the children’s accounts. They are obviously talking about very painful experiences that it would have been impossible to make up,” he said.

How did the NSPCC become involved in investigating Satanic ritual abuse? According to an *Independent on Sunday* investigation, an article by a former Society social worker, who had visited child abuse seminars in the States, first set out the investigative techniques used by NSPCC staff in Nottingham. The method involved encouraging children to play with suggestive toys (including witches’ costumes, syringes, monsters and dolls), and the stories that emerged during these ‘games’ could be used as a basis for further questioning. It was not until these techniques were introduced – some months into the Nottingham investigation – that allegations of SCA began to emerge, calling into question the dividing line between reality and fantasy in every ritual abuse case.

Another American source for much of the British SCA scare also involves Christian groups. In Kent, where perhaps the earliest report surfaced in 1988, copies of Pamela Klein’s ‘Satanic indicators’ were obtained from America; later it emerged that the team leader co-ordinating the investigation was chairman of the Social Workers’ Christian Fellowship (SWCF). The same list of ‘indicators’ were sent to Nottingham social workers by Ray Wyre, who trained to be a Baptist minister and now runs a clinic for sex offenders. Cheshire social workers received the list while they were investigating the Congleton case; and one of their team is secretary of the SWCF.

Other social workers and police were alerted to SCA by three 1989 conferences on the subject. The first, in April 1989, was organised by the Association of Christian Psychiatrists. Two others, at Reading and Dundee Universities, followed, organised



LEFT: South Ronaldsey parents protest for the return of their children.

by Klein and Norma Howes, the independent social worker whose involvement in the Kent case helped spark the scare. Delegates at the conferences were addressed by Klein and a Chicago police officer who recounted US cases, including one report of four babies cooked in a microwave oven. This classic folklore motif later surfaced in a modified form in Derbyshire. Material printed by the Reachout Trust was distributed at one London seminar at least.

Slowly, the circle of SCA ‘experts’ widened. Judy Parry, who advised Manchester police during the Rochdale investigation, was trained by Maureen Davis. Charity organiser Diana Core and Kevin Logan, the Blackburn vicar, advised locals in Cheshire. All are associated with the Evangelical Alliance. Experts in non-ritual child abuse were also involved; Mike Bishop, Manchester’s director of social services, was director of social services in Cleveland during the 1987 scandal. Beatrix Campbell, the journalist whose TV documentary reopened the Nottingham case, was the author of a book broadly supportive of the Cleveland doctors.

These ingredients set the scene for a social panic of historic proportions.

CONCLUSION

The ways in which the 1990 UK scare grew and spread deserve much more careful analysis than is possible here, and a two-year academic study of the scare, headed by Professor Jean La Fontaine of the London School of Economics, was ordered at the end of March.

Briefly, it seems that the panic fed on ancient fears of devils, strangers and child abduction; all common in folklore, all familiar to the protagonists on both sides. It collapsed under the sheer weight of allegations. A small number of independent covens might exist undiscovered, but long-term campaigns of mass-murder, sacrifice and ritual

abuse ought to leave some forensic evidence for the police. None has been found, and as the allegations (made increasingly by fringe Christian groups as the NSPCC and local authority social workers withdrew into an embarrassed silence) grew more outrageous, police and press grew increasingly sceptical. The result was a series of sharply critical articles, notably in the *Independent on Sunday*, and eventually a pathetic attempt by the NSPCC and Rochdale social services to deny they had ever used the word ‘Satanic’ in describing abuse.

In all, the five major UK SCA scares resulted in 69 children being made wards of court. Nine adults were imprisoned on charges of child abuse not including ritual abuse, and three more still face similar charges. One social services chief has resigned and at least two key social workers – the two women who instigated the Rochdale scare – have been moved to less sensitive duties.

The Social Services Inspectorate has circulated SCA ‘indicators’ to every social services department in Britain. Yet not a single documented case of ritual abuse has been unearthed and police say they have no evidence to bring charges against any of the adults who have come under suspicion. At present, Satanic ritual abuse is of greater interest to folklorists than criminologists.

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THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA ForteanTimes

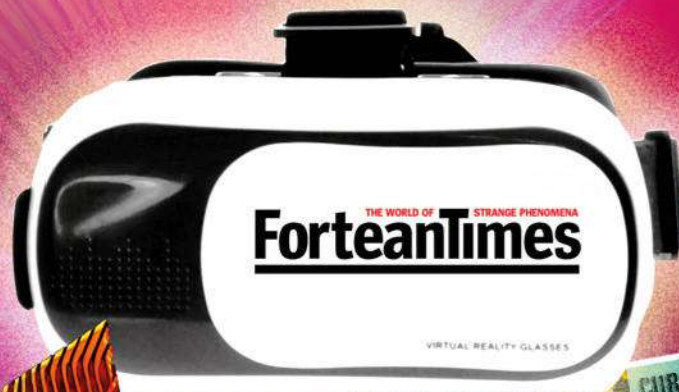
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A weighty tome – but is it reliable?

Is there actually such a thing as objective testimony for a close encounter or an abduction report, any more than we can speak of testimony for a dream or for a novel, asks **John Rimmer**

The Reliability of UFO Witness Testimony

ed. VJ Ballester-Olmos & Richard W Heiden

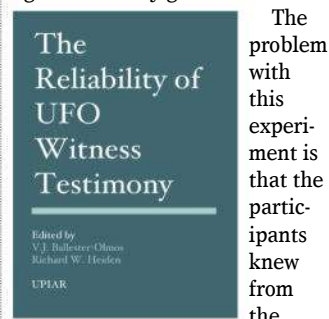
UFO Phenomena International Annual Review 2023
Pb, 712pp, €60, ISBN 9791281441002
Free PDF at academia.edu/101922617/The_Reliability_of_UFO_Witness_Testimony

This is a massive work, consisting of 57 reports, analyses and essays by a galaxy of contributors, including many well-known names mostly on the European sceptical side of ufology, but just two British contributors. There are good critical re-examinations of some famous cases such as the Phoenix Lights and the Cash-Landrum incident as well as a number of European cases that will be unfamiliar to English language readers.

One such case from Poland in 1980 involving a spectacular close encounter and “car chase” was identified using a technology not available to investigators at the time – Google Streetview. This enabled a later investigation led by Wim van Utrecht not only to determine that the object the witness saw was actually the Moon, but also allowed them to determine the correct date for the incident, which had been wrongly reported in the original article in *Flying Saucer Review*.

The American sceptic James Oberg provides another clear example of how a known stimulus can create a wide range of responses from witnesses, in his examination of reports generated by two identified night-time re-entries of space satellites, which produced spectacular fireball displays. These were a particularly good yardstick for gauging the accuracy of reports, as the stimulus is a well understood and well observed phenomenon, which is repeatedly seen.

Although hoaxes are briefly referred to in some of the essays, only one gives an account of a controlled experiment to determine how witnesses perceive a deliberately created visual stimulus. This involved showing four groups of people either a photographic slide or a colour print-out of a photograph of a “fire balloon” against a black sky background. Recorded in a series of graphs and tables, the experimenters judge how accurately the viewers described the image. The conclusion seems to have been that only one-third of the descriptions were evaluated “good” or “very good”.



The problem with this experiment is that the participants knew from the start that it was an experiment in an artificial environment and that there was no context to the image. It would have been interesting to have seen an analysis of the witness testimony of an experiment similar to that conducted at Warminster in 1970, where the original stimulus was carefully planned and recorded, and the experiment was conducted in a realistic outdoor setting so that the subsequent witness testimony could be accurately calibrated with the visual stimulus.

One contributor, Cláudio Tsuyoshi Suenaga, a Brazilian academic who has specialised in the history of occultism, compares UFO reports to works of art: “They are not descriptions of reality itself, [but] interpretations of a reality that tell us more

How many of them accurately judge the ‘reliability’ of the witness testimony is problematical

about the person who is expressing himself than the reality he is referring to.” I think this is accurate and it applies particularly to “close encounter” cases where there is no objective phenomenon against which to calibrate the accuracy of the percipient’s account. Hilary Evans has described such cases as psycho-dramas scripted, partly unconsciously and partly quite consciously, to express subjects and concerns that the percipient is otherwise unable to externalise.

This raises the question of what is actually “testimony” for a UFO report, particularly for accounts of close encounters, contact cases or abductions. Many of the investigative records in this book are fairly straightforward. A witness reports seeing something in the sky; often this is simply a light rather than a structured object. The investigator, using the data supplied by the witness, attempts to identify some object or phenomenon that is likely to be the stimulus for the witness’s report. As the carefully conducted investigations described here show, this is more often than not a successful project. Whether the witness subsequently accepts this explanation is, of course, another story.

But when we are confronted with cases like the Betty and Barney Hill abduction, or the Prospero Muñoz abduction case from southern Spain, a narrative which morphed in complex ways over a period of 40 years, we have

to ask if it is even meaningful to discuss the issue of the reliability of witness testimony. Is there actually such a thing as objective testimony for a close encounter or an abduction report, any more than we can speak of testimony for a dream or for a novel?

Nigel Watson’s analysis of the social, cultural and political influences that are apparent in the Hill Abduction gives important clues as to how the witnesses’ narratives were created, and José Ruesga Montiel’s description of the 40-year afterlife of the Muñoz case on how the narrative shifted and refocused through hypnosis, publicity and continuous recall. These are interesting and important analyses of the witnesses and the circumstances under which they had their experience, but they cannot be considered testimony to the reality of that experience. Similarly I find that although Claude Mauge’s account of the Claude Vorilhon/Raël affair provides an interesting overview of the birth and development of a UFO cult, it seems remote from the idea of gauging the reliability of individual witness testimonies.

Virtually every single essay in this collection is interesting, and they provide valuable insight into the way UFO phenomena are perceived, processed and recorded. But how many of them can actually be said to accurately judge the “reliability” of the witness testimony is problematical. Do we really need a 700-page A4 book weighing nearly two kilograms, to convince us that most UFO eyewitness testimony is more than a bit dodgy? Not if you’re familiar with the UFO story up to now, but quite a lot of people aren’t. But I am not sure this volume is the best way of ensuring that they are.

★★★★★

Esoteric art at the Tate

Marcus Williamson enjoys a sumptuously illustrated magical collection

Visions of the Occult

An Untold Story of Art & Magic

Victoria Jenkins

Tate Publishing 2022

Hb, 176pp, £25, ISBN 9781849767620

The Tate's first monograph dedicated to the theme of magic is remarkable for its depth and breadth of coverage. *Visions of the Occult* is a welcome recognition of the wider interest in the subject that has arisen in both popular culture and academia in recent years.

The work covers fortaan topics as diverse as witchcraft, secret orders and unseen energies, furnished with well-chosen illustrations of paintings and drawings. As Victoria Jenkins, a Tate archivist, says: "The occult, however, resists the logic systems of the archivist: it has a slippery nature, full of creatively adaptive ideas that transmute across classification. Amorphous and porous they feed into each other."

The range of sources is considerable. On alchemy, we read at one moment of John Dee and Edward Kelley – illustrated with Henry Glindoni's striking painting of Dee at the court of Elizabeth – continuing towards a written and visual encounter with the artist Tony Cragg, a trained biochemist who became "one of the world's foremost sculptors". We follow the auric thread, as the author takes us into a discussion of Carl Jung, who recognised alchemy as a philosophical device and as the way for the individual to "bring forth their inner gold".

We learn that Paul Klee, the Swiss-born German artist,

was inspired by his journeys throughout the Harz, a highland area in northern Germany. On April 30 every year, local people celebrate with dancing and folksong on Walpurgis Night, a time when the "threshold between the realms of mortals and spirits thins, and passing from one to the other is possible". Klee's *Walpurgis Night* (1935), an abstract painting, possibly an owl-like figure with outstretched wings, peers out at us from the facing page.

In the chapter on Tarot, instead of illustrating from a standard Tarot pack, Jenkins takes her pick from the Tate's collection to present a unique and astonishing artists' "major arcana" including *The Fool* by Cecil Collins, a High Priestess from an oil by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Hierophant* by Rebecca Horn and *The Moon* by Dame Barbara Hepworth.

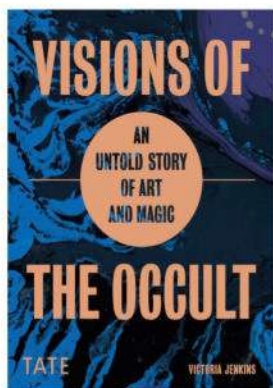
As would be expected from a Tate Publishing production, the work is beautifully produced and sumptuously illustrated, showing many rare and precious works from the archive in book form for the first time.

It is particularly pleasing to see so many lesser-known

artists represented. Names such as Austin Osman Spare and Ithell Colquhoun were once known only to a select group of initiates; through volumes such as this, their work is now becoming visible to a wider public.

In choosing so many works by Colquhoun, whose paintings and drawings are relevant to virtually every chapter, the book anticipates the forthcoming major retrospective of her work planned by the Tate for 2025, based on their extensive holdings in the archive.

★★★★★



Occult Russia

Pagan, Esoteric and Mystical Traditions

Christopher McIntosh

Inner Traditions 2023

Pb, 262pp, £18.99, ISBN 9781644114186

Amid the suspicion shown towards the West and the unfolding tragedy that currently haunts our airwaves, Christopher McIntosh's occult history of Russia explores the mystical and philosophical discourses that have arguably complemented such political exceptionalism. McIntosh offers the reader a survey of the *Silver Age* of Russian

spiritual enquiry (1890-1920) alongside the revolutionary and contemporary intellectual scene.

What emerges is the degree to which the contemporary "god seekers" remain true to the speculative anthropology, cosmic musings and alternative histories of such familiar figures as Madame Blavatsky, George Gurdjieff and Nikolai Roerich. Familiar occult tropes such as the quest for the Hyperborea and the existence of a utopian society are explored; yet, not surprisingly, missions to remote areas of the Russian Empire, namely Altai and Tuva – the very stuff of adventure stories – were increasingly viewed with suspicion by the Communist State. A familiar tale, we discover, as McIntosh's many vignettes of utopian mystics emerging from the early days of Russian Rosicrucian and masonic lodges tend to end in internment and death. Whether under Tsarist or Communist strictures, pluralism remained contentious.

McIntosh tackles the array of beliefs and practices that characterise Russian spirituality to date. Alongside the Orthodox Church and the urban esoteric magical orders, a network of folk healers and "fools" addressed the spiritual needs of the people at a roots level. Bypassing authority, visionaries like Grigori Rasputin and Saint Matrona of Moscow captured the public imagination and along with the shamanic and Tibetan Buddhist input of its diverse communities, created a unique amalgam of Slavic

spiritual identity. For McIntosh, an enduring desire to unite the Slavic worldview with Vedic and Aryan forebears is embodied in the disputed *Book of Veles* (1919), and perpetuated in the nationalist neo-paganism of Victor Megre's *Gospel of Anastasia*.

However, such a yearning is qualified by the sinister apocalypticism he observes in organisations like the Iuzhinsky Circle of the 1970s, from which a confrontational admixture of traditionalism, occultism and Eurasianism emerged, spawning Vladimir Putin's chosen philosopher, Alesandr Dugin. If eternal war isn't your bag, McIntosh notes, you could of course throw your hand in with the legacy of Cosmists Nikolai Fyodorov and Valerii Dyomin whose quest for eternal life and time travel is continued by the Izborsky Club and tonsil-challenging International Scientific Research Institute of Cosmoplanetary Anthropoecology, who envisage Russia as a space ark powered by the magical "Kozyrev Mirror". Shambhala beckons!

A fascinating and highly readable insight into what remains an occulture that is demonstrably unique in so many ways, well-researched with comprehensive notes, bibliography and index.

Chris Hill

★★★★★

We Are All Monsters

How Deviant Organisms Came to Define Us

Andrew Mangham

MIT Press 2023

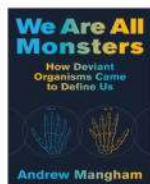
Hb, 329pp, £30, ISBN 9780262047524

We Are All Monsters is "concerned with monsters as they were once defined in the biological sciences ... born with at least one permanent physiological defect". Historical conceptions of "monstrosity" have covered a wide range of explanations: monsters as natural experiments, as a failure to reach full potential, or as a result of environmental factors. Mangham argues that the history of monstrosity is as relevant today as it has ever been: prenatal screening, for example, suggests a continued association between "difference" and "defect". But, for Mangham, monsters also have creative and imaginative potential. The book aims to recover more positive



historical interpretations of monstrosity and to question the drive to impose order on that which cannot be easily classified.

The chapters alternate between in-depth explorations of contemporary scientific theory and examinations of literary “monsters”. Frankenstein’s Creat-



ure is here of course, but also some of the literary creations of Charles Dickens, whose depiction of dwarf Miss Mowcher in *David Copperfield* elicited legal action from a neighbour who recognised herself in the character. Most interesting is the chapter on the now almost forgotten author Lucas Malet – a pseudonym for Mary St Leger Kingsley, daughter of Charles Kingsley. Her *History of Sir Richard Calmady*, whose main protagonist lacks lower limbs, scandalised contemporary readers.

By examining science and literature Mangham highlights the overlap between the two, something increasingly discussed by scholars of the Victorian era and *fin-de-siècle* in recent years. Mary Shelley had solid knowledge of contemporary science, as did Dickens, but Mangham delves deep into letters and diaries to show how scientific ideas were inevitably shaped by social and cultural mores. Shelley’s description of cretins in Switzerland as “loathsome creepers” belies the 19th-century shift towards thinking of monstrosity in terms of a problem to be solved, rather than a part of the natural order. Mangham avoids venturing into the territory of the freak show – ably covered by several other authors – but it would have been interesting to hear something of how scientific thinking played out in popular culture beyond the novel (the selective breeding of 19th-century dog fancying, for instance).

It’s unfortunate that a book published by an academic press contains quite a few typos and copy-editing errors. There is a helpful Glossary at the end of the book, but many readers will find it a dense read regardless, with assumed knowledge (the works of Dickens; past diagnostic criteria) sometimes hampering their progress.

Jennifer Wallis



Psychic Observers

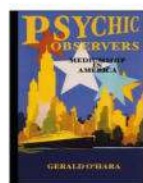
Mediumship in America

Gerald O'Hara

KDP/Amazon Publishing 2023

Pb, 290pp, £12.99, ISBN 9798359272261

A slightly misleading title: this is a history of the US Spiritualist newspaper *Psychic Observer*, which ran from 1938 to 1963, edited by indefatigable husband-and-wife team Ralph and Juliette Pressing. Ralph began in 1934, launching *Dale News Inc*, a weekly magazine providing a programme of events, speakers and reports of mediums’ performances at Spiritualist camps that had sprung up across the USA between the wars. Publicising forthcoming Spiritualist meetings in one’s locality, with the visit of a distinguished medium an added attraction, did much to spread the word.



An appendix lists 76 camps, of which New

York State’s Lily Dale was and is the largest and most famous. Today, the village’s residents include numerous mediums who attract tourists from all over the USA (and beyond) for private consultations.

The *Psychic Observer* was instrumental in the growth of the US Spiritualist movement; in 1940, Ralph’s business acumen saw him appear on *We the People*, a nationally syndicated radio show with two million listeners.

The Pressings relied to an extent on revenue generated from classified ads, with astrologers, palm-readers, clairvoyants and absent healers all in evidence. Most healers asked for a “Love Offering Only”, offering prayers and personal advice. A Dr Raymond Evans went one stage further, offering “Power of Nature, laying-on-hands with Super-sonics”, while “The Sanctuary of the Spheres” advised the sick to seek healing via “Dr Moon and his staff”. During the 1950s, a regular quarter-page advert appeared in the *Observer*, showing one “Bishop Raleigh” in full clerical garb, who claimed ordination by the “Chaldean Rite”.

A Dr McFerrin challenged those who suffered from “Rectal Neurosis”, asking them combatively: “Do you doubt

this... Do you want to argue?” As a cure, he offered “A wonderful course in rectal rehabilitation”.

This is not a book for those seeking a history of Spiritualism in the USA. Nor is it for the casual reader. It would have benefited from a proof reader; for example, the epigraph on page (i) should be attributed to the poet John Donne, not Dunne. And the index, ordered by first names rather than surnames, is unusual.

But one cannot fault the author’s exhaustive research, which appears to have been a labour of love. There are nine appendices, one of which shows “the growth of Camp Chesterfield between 1917 and 1947” employing charts and tables to show gate receipts for each year (subdivided into daily, season and weekly ticket sales).

Some of this could be regarded as Too Much Information, but the sheer level of detail may well prove a useful resource for the dedicated researcher.

Christopher Josiffe



The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think

Carolyne Larrington

Thames and Hudson 2023

Hb, 304pp, £20, ISBN 9780500252345

The sagas, poetry and art of early mediæval and mediæval Scandinavia are having one of their periodic spotlight moments in popular culture, with characters and concepts from these stories appearing in film, television, video games, literature and more. Carolyne Larrington explores not just these myths and legends themselves but the ways in which generations of writers, artists and audiences have interpreted and reinterpreted them to address the concerns of their own cultures.

Larrington opens with a discussion of the importance of these stories, which she argues “have continued to be thought about and understood as meaningful” even after they were no longer involved in active religious practice. She covers the sources, both textual and material, and the challenges of interpreting them.

Next up is an overview of the broad cultural trends in the

interpretation of Scandinavian myth, from 18th-century authors who sought to portray early mediæval Scandinavians as hardy, self-reliant proto-Protestants to 19th-century nationalists who sought in Icelandic literature a guide to an ancestral “Germanic” mythology.

Throughout her introduction, Larrington stresses that these are varied stories, constantly being reinterpreted, and that these reinterpretations are the subject of the book. The book is divided into sections covering individual myths, with one chapter each for Yggdrasill, Valhöll, Óðinn, Þórr, Loki, Berserkers, Sigurðr the dragon-slayer, Ragnar Shaggy-breeches, and the Norse settlement of North America, before concluding with a look at Ragna Rök, the myth of the end of the world.

In discussing reinterpretations of Norse myth, Larrington takes an inclusive view of the subject, covering not only direct adaptations of Norse myths and sagas like 1958’s *The Vikings* or *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla*, but also fantasy series that draw inspiration from Norse myth and seemingly-unrelated films, such as *Django Unchained*, which draw inspiration from Wagner.

Some of the material covered in these sections will be familiar to readers of recent books like Campbell’s *Norse America* or Dale’s *The Myths and Realities*



of the Viking berserkr, but the range of topics covered is so broad that most students of Norse mythology

will find new adaptations and interpretations.

The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think is a fascinating tour of the different ways in which these stories have been understood and reimagined. The nature of a wide-ranging survey like this one is that each reader will find some areas familiar and wish that others could have been explored in depth, but this is simply a consequence of the format.

As could be expected from the publisher, this book is lavishly illustrated, complementing the text’s discussion of artistic representations of Norse myth.

James Holloway



Understanding cults?

David V Barrett contrasts an outstanding study of the tragedy at Waco and a pejorative mish-mash of American movements

Waco

David Koresh, the Branch Davidians and a Legacy of Rage

Jeff Guinn

Simon & Schuster 2023

Hb, 383pp, £20, ISBN 9781982186104

American Cults

Cabals, Corruption and Charismatic Leaders

Jim Willis

Visible Ink Press 2023

Pb, 346pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781578598007

Here are two books on cults that couldn't be more different.

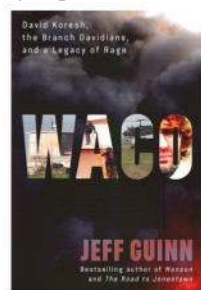
Jeff Guinn's *Waco* is a real rarity: a book on a cult by a journalist that is scholarly, well-researched, well-balanced and not in the slightest sensationalist. Guinn spends the first few chapters on the complex historical background of the movement that became the Branch Davidians; we watched in horror as its compound exploded into flames in 1993, killing 76 people, including 25 children and two pregnant women. Nearly a third – 24 people – were British.

Guinn writes with a sympathetic understanding of the increasingly left-field apocalyptic beliefs developed by leader David Koresh, while not shying away from his less savoury aspects, particularly his illegal gun-dealing, the harsh conditions and poor food his followers endured, and worst, his insistence on their celibacy while he indulged in under-age sex with a large number of their daughters.

Most valuable in this book is Guinn's use of first-hand sources including surviving Branch Davidians and agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF). It's clear that at every stage, from initial planning to execution of the first raid, 51 days before the conflagration, it was a badly planned shambles; its success depended entirely on surprise, but Koresh knew it was coming; and there was no back-up plan if anything went wrong – and everything did.

Guinn also quotes extensively two scholars who came from similar religious backgrounds to the Branch Davidians, Prof James Tabor and Dr J Phillip Arnold, who understood where Koresh was coming from and offered to talk with him. I had discussions with both Tabor and Arnold when doing my own research into a related religion some years ago; they know their stuff. Koresh repeatedly told the FBI that he was working on an exposition of the Seven Seals of Revelation 5-8, and would be happy to surrender peacefully once he had completed this; he also said he was willing to talk with Tabor and Arnold. The FBI refused this; instead of waiting for a few days and allowing discussion with people who knew what Koresh was talking about – what was massively important to him theologically

– they stormed the compound. Former senator John Danforth's whitewash report absolved



the ATF and FBI of any blame for the deaths of 76 men, women and young children, but there is no doubt in my mind that the bungled actions of the former and the intransigent approach of the latter were responsible – and Guinn's extraordinarily well-researched book, in a measured way, supports this.

The sub-title of *American Cults* tells you all you need to know of its stance before you even open it. The sad thing is that Jim Willis is knowledgeable – he has a master's in theology, and he gives an excellent summary of the different beliefs of millennialism – but his book is negative and pejorative from the start.

He begins with a perfectly anodyne definition of the word "cult" from the OED and accepts

that theologians refer to early Christianity as a Jesus cult – then immediately says that all the cults in this book will be evil. Really, what's the point? All the religions – Aum Shinrikyo, the Peoples Temple, Heaven's Gate, Scientology and 30-odd more in a very jumbled structure – have been thoroughly dissected in a far more scholarly way by other authors; all that Willis is doing is standing on a soapbox and shouting "They're evil!"

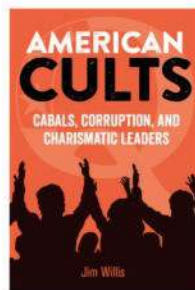
Despite this, at one point he writes completely accurately: "We cannot lump what we believe to be cults together and issue a blanket opinion." Yet that is precisely what his book is doing throughout.

His basic assumptions about what characterises a cult are dubious to begin with. "Cults don't always have bad intentions, but the ones we are going to study, for the most part, do." Duh? That's openly cherry-picking the data, which negates any attempt at balance in the book. "Cults begin with a founder who is at least narcissistic and usually psychopathic." No evidence is given for this. "The easiest way to spot a cult is to identify an obsession with crystal balls and conspiracies." Again, no evidence for this assertion – and a fair number of the movements he describes (including multi-level marketing organisations) clearly don't fit his definition.

But one wonders how much of the antagonistic approach was at the urging of the publisher; the book's back cover categorises it as "True Crime/Con Artists/Hoaxes & Deception". In other words, it aims from the start to be lowest-common-denominator, sensationalist populist fare.

Guinn ★★★★★

Willis ★★



The Spiritual Power of Masks

Doorways to Realms Unseen

Nigel Pennick

Destiny Books 2022

Pb, 312pp, £18.99, ISBN 9781644114049

Everybody loves a mask. Aesthetics aside, they can cover a multitude of functions – and sins. As Nigel Pennick puts it in this ambitious and lavishly illustrated book, their use ranges "from religious and rural ritual to theatrical performance, carnival, and riot".

He gives us a grand sweep of masking and disguise customs, centred on European traditions. He proceeds from the sensible recognition that "tradition constructs the present out of the past". His largely thematic survey is roughly historical, from Greek theatrical costumes to Pussy Riot and heavy metal masking.

Inevitably, given this vast range, the book is sometimes chaotically broad, albeit in a pleasantly digressive way. We stray at times into fascinating material that seems rather tangential and not well integrated. Pennick also tends to become more breathlessly sketchy the closer he gets to today, where the volume of material available does not allow him to be as systematically restrained as he is with earlier stuff.

The breathless quality, compounded by some editorial sloppiness, seems also driven by an idea that Pennick doesn't quite spell out explicitly and which is rather more debatable from a folkloristic perspective.

Regardless of the changes in tradition, Pennick hints at an underlying consistency of spiritual content and meaning across apparently similar phenomena. The Wild Hunt does always tend to bring this out in authors: here we find them linked to Wagner's Valkyries, the *commedia dell'arte* and "Ghost Riders in the Sky". This may be a reach, although it certainly does show the thinking of some modern practitioners.

This isn't the last word, it isn't as universalising as it perhaps thinks, but it is an often highly engaging and informed step into a world where not everyone is as they seem to be.

Paul Cowdell

★★★★★



SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

DAVID V BARRETT ROUNDS UP THE LATEST TITLES FROM THE WORLD OF SPECULATIVE AND FANTASTIC FICTION

Children of the Sun

Beth Lewis

Hodder & Stoughton 2023

Hb, 432pp, £20, ISBN 9781529357721

Beth Lewis's powerful first novel *Children of the Sun* was inspired by the Heaven's Gate tragedy. In a community out in the wilds, their charismatic leader Sol, formerly a maverick scientist, promises to reunite his followers with those they have lost, by leading them through into a parallel world formed when each of them made a different decision. We see the group through three very different viewpoints: a journalist who lost his lover in a car crash, now trying to find the truth about the movement; a young woman who is a former member, determined to bring Sol to justice; and a six-year-old child, one of eight Sunbeams who are at the heart of Sol's plan to open the door to a new world and a new life for the members. Thoughtful and often disturbing, this takes us into the heart of a community of true-believers right through the climax of their beliefs.



The Pepsi-Cola Addict

June-Alison Gibbons

Strange Attractor Press 2023

Pb, 143pp, £17.99, ISBN 9781913689711

The Pepsi-Cola Addict is an odd little novel. It was written by June-Alison Gibbons when she was only 16; she was one of the "silent twins", who spoke only to each other for most of their lives, until Jennifer died aged 29 after they had spent 11 years incarcerated in Broadmoor. The story is about a 14-year-old Californian boy, Preston, who loves Pepsi. It explores his sexual awakening: an on-off non-relationship with a girl; resisting the advances of his male best friend; being seduced by his teacher. A novel of adolescent loneliness, it's strangely moving and very maturely written, despite the occasional awkwardness of the writing – the twins had bought a mail-order writing course, which clearly instructed them to use lots of adverbs! This is a classic of outsider writing,

and full marks to Strange Attractor for republishing it.

The Napoleon of Notting Hill

GK Chesterton

MIT Press 2023

Pb, 222pp, £11.99, ISBN 9780262546416

Another reissue, this time from MIT's "Radium Age" series of early science fiction, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* is GK Chesterton's first novel. Set in 1984, in a London completely unchanged from when it was written 80 years earlier, this is a strange social satire. Instead of hereditary succession the king is chosen at random from government officials, and the lot falls to Auberon Quinn, who out of sheer fun decides that each borough of London should be an independent city state, with crests, pageantry and heralds carrying halberds. Most areas of London grudgingly put up with the joke, but the young provost of Notting Hill takes it seriously – and when his southern neighbours plan to drive a new road through his streets he declares war on them. Once you get used to the heaviness of the prose and the verbose pomposity of the characters this is a fascinating study of arrogance and folly, of progress and tradition and, oddly, of human nature itself.

A Portrait in Shadow

Nicole Jarvis

Titan Books 2023

Pb, 478pp, £9.99, ISBN 9781803362342

How could I resist an historical fantasy about Artemisia Gentileschi, the 17th-century Italian artist? In Nicole Jarvis's *A Portrait in Shadow*, Artemisia is trying to establish herself in Florence following the scandal of the trial of her former tutor in Rome, who raped her; he was found guilty, but it was her reputation that suffered. She soon finds a wealthy patron in the powerful Medicis, but as a woman she struggles to gain acceptance by the Accademia delle Arti della Magica – for here, artists imbue their paintings

with magic for healing. But if magic can be used for healing, it can also be used for harm, and Artemisia has sworn vengeance against her rapist. Too many historical fantasies are overdone adventures set in poorly imagined generic pasts; this one is first and foremost an historical novel, set in a well-researched and believable world of which magic is an integral part. Though fiction, the story is firmly based in reality. Artemisia's determination catches you on the first page and doesn't let go. A joy to read.

Revelations

Roz Kaveney

Plus One Press 2023

Pb, 389pp, £19.99, ISBN 9780997745320

It's 11 years since *Rituals*, the first volume of Roz Kaveney's Rituals of Blood series; now the fifth book, *Revelations*, brings the story to an end. And what a story! Throughout the series the immortal Huntress Mara, though not a god, strides up and down through the millennia stopping many gods and goddesses from increasing their power through shedding blood; while former student Emma, separated from her ghost girlfriend, becomes a god and takes over running Hell. History, mythology, folklore, the great heroes and villains of the classics – Kaveney is a classicist – and even our old friend Aleister, all blend together in a gloriously colourful tapestry. Her publisher let her down with poor proof-reading, but the ending of *Revelations*, the final physical and magical battle between the forces that Mara and Emma have brought together from gods and mythologies throughout time to confront their millennia-long adversary, is a powerful culmination to the series.

Mr Breakfast

Jonathan Carroll

Melville House 2023

Hb, 272pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781612199924

I'd not read a Jonathan Carroll novel for years; I'm delighted to say that his unique style of

magical realism is as stunning as ever. In *Mr Breakfast* struggling stand-up comedian Graham Patterson gets a tattoo – then finds he's been given the option of choosing one of three very different versions of his life; he can visit each one up to three times before deciding between them forever. But the lives presented to him – continuing his current life, or becoming a hugely successful comedian, or marrying his former girlfriend Ruth and having a family – aren't as straightforward as they initially seem. Interleaved with Graham's story is a young writer interviewing Ruth about her memories of Graham long after his disappearance – and gradually the two strands of the story become interwoven. Often funny, very often poignant, this novel (without ever saying so) epitomises the saying "Be careful what you wish for".

Proof That the Devil Loves You

Gilbert Hernandez

Fantagraphics 2023

Hb, 96pp, £24.99, ISBN 9781683967699

Proof That the Devil Loves You is the latest collection of B-movie stories told in graphic novel form starring Fritz, the half-sister of Luba from Gilbert Hernandez's *Love & Rockets* stories set in the central American village of Palomar. The first, and most fulfilling, story is

set in a village not unlike Palomar, with characters caricaturing some of those we've known for decades in the comics. Fritz's character Bula is a confused version of Luba (carrying a screwdriver instead of Luba's omnipresent hammer); the young mayor

struts around tyrannically; and a young woman, Gisela, keeps trying to leave the town but is unable to. The second story, a cartoonish tale in space, morphs into the most metafictional of the stories, as various versions of Fritz, playing different B-movie characters, meet up with each other. This isn't Hernandez's strongest collection; perhaps he needs to step back from the multi-level metafiction to the simple solid believable reality of his characters' lives.



What's good for the mongoose...

You wait ages for a review of *Nandor Fodor and the Talking Mongoose* and then two come along at the same time... Daniel King and Richard Freeman offer very different views of Adam Sigal's Gef film



Nandor Fodor and the Talking Mongoose

Dir Adam Sigal, UK 2023
Streaming on Amazon Prime

Regular *FT* readers will be aware of Nandor Fodor and his investigation into reports of a talking mongoose. For the uninitiated, I would heartily recommend Chris Josiffe's recent piece ([FT436:32-35](#)) to get up to speed. However, the bones of it are that in the 1930s, Nandor Fodor, a Hungarian parapsychologist, was encouraged by psychic researcher Harry Price to look into the case of the Irving family who claimed their remote farmhouse on the Isle of Man was regularly visited by a mongoose called Gef, who would converse with them.

Writer-director Adam Sigal's film covers this period and on the face of it is one of those predictably heartwarming and whimsical British fantasies; the title alone tells you that. The cast too – Simon Pegg, Minnie Driver, Christopher Lloyd, Paul Kaye, Tim Downie – makes it plain that this

If one strongly wants to believe in something, can the mind create it?

isn't going to be a searing drama. However, there's a lot more to it than that.

The first scene proper is a radio interview involving Fodor (Pegg) in which he explains his interest in the field: that is to say, what prompts an individual to see things – a ghost, for instance – that are invisible to others? He says that what obsesses him is to understand *why* he can see what he sees. It's a great scene, dimly lit, in which cigarette smoke surrounds the characters like mist, evoking a sense of mystery, the unknown and perhaps the supernatural.

Actually, much of the film is given over to conversations in dimly lit rooms, and that is one of its few real weaknesses: it is *very* talky. From the point at which Fodor receives a letter from Price

(Lloyd), meets him and travels to the Isle of Man there is 20 straight minutes of conversation or voice over. That's a lot for a film which runs for (excluding the admittedly very amusing end credits) less than 90 minutes.

Once we reach the Isle of Man, though, the film becomes hugely entertaining, and unexpectedly moving, occasionally at the same time. For instance, after Fodor and his assistant Anne (Driver) have settled in, she walks to the only local pub for a nightcap. There she meets Maurice (Paul Kaye), who claims to have encountered Gef and relates his tale: not only is it entertaining and moving, it also has a creepy air to it, a suggestion of things taking place that shouldn't – or couldn't – take place, such as an animal reciting a Yeats poem; especially one that hasn't yet been published.

Fodor is consistently frustrated in his attempts to see Gef; the mysterious mongoose always seems to have just left, or is hiding or sulking – there's always an excuse. Fodor hears noises, he speaks to Gef and,

on one occasion, even receives a telephone call from him (imparting information that he couldn't possibly know), but he never sees him. Which of course brings us back to that opening sequence in which Fodor asserts that just because others can't see what *he* sees doesn't mean it isn't there.

Despite that assertion, Fodor is adamant that it's all a hoax, a view reinforced when the Irvings' handyman Errol (Gary Beadle) concedes that Gef doesn't exist. Fodor's focus shifts to why the Irvings are perpetrating a hoax; what could they possibly stand to gain? He also struggles with his desire to see Gef, despite his conviction that the creature doesn't exist: he wants to believe, but can't. The film, and indeed Fodor, asks the question: if one wants to believe in something strongly enough, can the mind create it?

Such matters take up the last portion of the film, in which Fodor has a long, dark night of the soul while being held in jail for being drunk and disorderly. There, he has his longest conversation with Gef and in his drunken state pleads for some proof. He gets it – or does he?

This is a highly enjoyable and amiable film which works just fine as a quintessentially British comedy about eccentrics and will keep you chuckling and leave you smiling. But in its own quiet way it also asks profound questions about emotions and the human mind. To what extent do humans create for themselves images and concepts that give them comfort in the face of fear, or the fearsome nothingness of the void, or the unspoken realisation that what we make of our time on Earth is all there is. The final shot is simple and yet somehow incredibly moving; but maybe I'm seeing something that isn't there...

Daniel King





TELEVISION

FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current fortéan offerings



A large, grey, scientific-looking room: we slowly zoom in on a 1970s vintage CRT TV in the middle of it, just knowing it'll crackle into life any second. Will it be *Poltergeist*-style static? Balok from *Star Trek*? A still-dark-haired John Craven in a kipper tie presenting *Newsround*? It's Craven.

Many of us of a certain vintage will probably remember that very episode as it was the first time we'll have heard of what would become the 1977 Broad Haven UFO flap, in which schoolchildren claimed to have seen something unearthly-looking land in a field next to their playground, followed by multiple UFO-type sightings by 450 witnesses in the same, general area in south-west Wales (see **FT357:16-18**). Cut to today,

the same playground and the now middle-aged former pupils pointing out the geography and recounting it, their sincerity as tangible as the day *Newsround* rocked up and interviewed them as goggling under-10s.

This is episode one of *Encounters* (Netflix), from Spielberg's Amblin company. Back in the grey room, a portly, grey-haired chap takes a seat and an unseen interviewer asks him to tell them a secret. Dr Kevin Knuth, ex-NASA, replies that maybe science is afraid of investigating the truth, which is hardly Earth-shattering

Schoolchildren claimed to have seen something land in a field

as secrets go, but at least it's not claims of whole holiday parks full of greys in Nevada. Back to the school where it all started, and how Randall Jones Pugh, local vet and BUFORA investigator, got on the case. Cue archive footage of Pugh, in the collar and tie, pork-pie hat and sheepskin coat combo favoured by both paranormal investigators and rugby commentators of the day, pronouncing almost ecstatically about the mysteries of interstellar life, segueing into *FT*'s very own David Clarke recounting his excitement about the case as a 10-year-old, and adding some important cultural context: this was contemporary with *Close Encounters* among other things, and Clarke remarks that the children's drawings of the craft strongly resemble that in *Forbidden Planet*, which had recently been on telly. Tony Cowan, ex-RAF liaison officer for a local airbase, says he received a lot of queries

from locals about weird lights, most of which he admits he couldn't explain, officially or otherwise. Back to Clarke to forge the link between folklore and ufology: the former is strong in that part of the world, so there's an underlying sociological acceptance of the concept of the "other", important when witnesses wish to express themselves, the very landscape enabling their experiences.

As usual, much of this may not be news to our own demographic, but this appeals as much to a lay audience, and the respectful, sober, straight-documentary treatment works well, framing the saga in well-judged location shots. Further incidents are explored: a silver giant looking through farmhouse windows (another common trope from across the paranormal spectrum, though no mention of Gort), MIB encounters, how it all snowballed, and the ongoing legacy. Well-balanced and thoughtful.

Fortéana is a rich potential source for film-makers. I recall chatting to Ashley Thorpe, director and writer of the 2017 *Borley Rectory* film, and mentioning that I was amazed nobody had made a film about Gef the Talking Mongoose. He told me that he had heard that it was "on the cards". I was excited. The Gef saga is one of the greatest cases in the annals of the weird; surely it would make a terrific film...

And now I have seen it.

I've seen many things I love cheapened and bastardised on the screen in recent years, but *Nandor Fodor and the Talking Mongoose* is on a wholly different level, as it was based, allegedly, on real events; not that you would know that from the film itself.

Written and directed by Adam Sigal, the movie bears

only scant relationship with the actual story. If Fodor were still alive, he would sue, as the film portrays him as a violent alcoholic. In one scene he drunkenly invades Cashen's Gap in the wee small hours, threatening to knock a barn down with a sledgehammer.

I knew something was amiss when the writer couldn't even get the Irving family dog's name right, calling her Ralph rather than Mona. Ghost hunter Harry Price, meanwhile, is inexplicably turned into an American played by Christopher Lloyd.

Completely non-existent fictional characters are introduced. In the film, the Irvings have a farm worker called Errol (something they could never have afforded). Another invention is pub landlord Maurice, who saw

Gef and heard him sing at his wife's funeral. The story of Gef is astounding enough without such nonsense muddying the waters. Why couldn't Sigal just have told the story as it stands?

As for the Irvings, they are poorly served. Margaret, whom Gef called "the Voodoo Woman" because of her otherworldly aura, is just a simpering housewife who bakes cakes. Voirrey is shown to be a ventriloquist, but nothing more is made of her character. Fodor concluded that Gef was a "split off part of Jim Irving's personality that had possessed a real mongoose". But nothing is made of that idea. Cashen's Gap itself is shown as a cheery place, not the dark, dilapidated, isolated house it was. The film wasn't even shot on the Isle of Man, and the bleak beauty of the island is

sorely missed as a result.

And as for Gef himself, when he finally turns up, he is shown to be an African banded mongoose – nothing like the real Gef, who claimed to be from India.

Nandor Fodor and the Talking Mongoose is the worst kind of missed opportunity. It could have been great; it could have told the true story of the Dalby Spook; but it is a parade of forgettable rubbish. What next, a bio-pic of Ivan T Sanderson in which he runs a small DIY shop in Rotherham? A film about Aleister Crowley preforming his Ritual of Abramelin the Mage at the boating lake in Wicksteed Park?

I hope that one day dear old Gef gets a proper film or TV series.

Richard Freeman



One God but many Religions.

WHY?

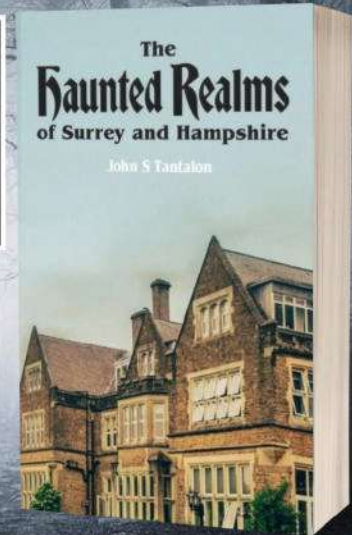
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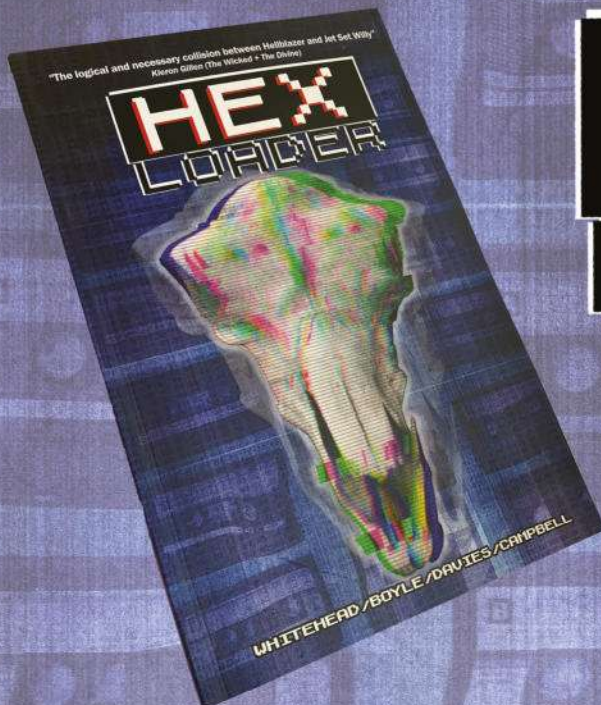
**FROM THE HAUNTED WORLD
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Memories of Fortean Times

Many congratulations on your 50th anniversary. You've been a part of my life now for almost half of that time, through many ups and downs, and I can honestly say you've opened doors for me that I could never have imagined. Your influence on my thinking has been immense, a fact for which I'm eternally grateful. Here's to the next 50 years, at which point I'll be a sprightly 99!

Arthur Burton
Maidstone, Kent

It was at the 1979 World SF Convention (Seacon 79), in Brighton's Metropole Hotel over the August Bank Holiday weekend. I was sitting having a drink and a natter with a few friends in one of the many bars (essentially what conventions are for), and I happened to be wearing a denim jacket with a large Grateful Dead *Skull and Roses* patch (actually 'borrowed' from an old edition of *The Rubaiyat Of Omar Khayyam*) sewn on the back. A slightly dishevelled figure in hippie/gypsy gear shuffled over and said: "If you're into Grateful Dead, you must be into weird shit..." I allowed as to how I might be said to be into weird shit, and he said, "Have you ever seen one of these?" as he thrust a copy of *Fortean Times* 29 at me – he had a bag full of them, plus subscription forms. Yes, it was none other than Ion Will [see obit FT274:23-24]. I admitted I'd noticed adverts for the mag in semi-pro music mags like *Zigzag* and *Dark Star*, but had never actually seen a copy. I flicked through the pages, said, "This looks really interesting" and immediately bought a subscription – and shortly thereafter bought gift subs for a few friends. One or two said, "I'm not really interested in this sort of thing," while others kept on reading FT for some time. I also immediately started sending in odd news clippings, but never bothered putting my name on them, so it wasn't until I included a letter about a FOAF-tale I'd heard, very similar to one mentioned in FT, that my name started appearing in the credits. Haven't missed an



Peter Simonson sent us this rhino in an oak tree in Christchurch Park, Ipswich.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH or to sieveking@forteanimes.com

issue yet, and I still always read it cover-to-cover. So you must be doing something right!

Incidentally, the *Dark Star* mag mentioned above was co-edited and partly written by Steve Burgess, who I'm sure had a regular column in FT [He contributed a column called 'Under the Eye' to FT29+30 – Ed.], and who worked in Dark They Were And Golden-Eyed – presumably how he got to know the FT crowd, since they did clipping-sorts in a room there. I did try to have a chat with him when he was helping mind the DTWAGE book-stall at the Con to suggest a Dead Heads room party; the party never happened, although I did meet Linda Krawecki (she went on to organise one of the late UnConventions at the Regent's Street Polytechnic), who was wearing a *Blues for Allah* T-shirt at the time. Oh what a tangled web we weave.

Owen Whiteoak
London

In 1973 I was a second-year student with a passion for science fiction and all things fortean so was already familiar with the works of John Michell, Bernard Heuvelmans, Frank Edwards, John Keel, and, of course, Charles Fort. I heard about *The News* in an SF fandom newsletter called *Checkpoint* and immediately subscribed, backdating it to issue 1. Such was my interest that I was keen to meet the man behind *The News* and visited Bob Rickard at Fortean Towers, from memory, in 1975.

I've been a subscriber ever since and, until about 15 years ago, still had every issue. Space considerations led me to dispose of them, apart from a cache of the first 30 that I came across in the attic earlier this year.

Having been more of a 'true believer' in 1973, life experience and revelations regarding the infamous Loch Ness and Cottingley Fairies photographs has made me much more of a sceptic, probably

closer these days to being a proper fortean. My wife of nearly 50 years shares my interest and is as avid a reader of FT as I am. I can see us going the distance

Richard & Celia Cotton
Leicester, Leicestershire

I discovered FT after collecting the partwork magazine series *The Unexplained*, which finished in 1983. As I recall, the last issue had a list of publications whose subject matter related to *The Unexplained's* content. The description of FT attracted me, and I took out a subscription. Although the magazine has changed somewhat over the years, it still maintains the principles I recall from the first issues I read, and as always I read it cover to cover. I was delighted to discover that FT had published the issues I had missed in book form, so I was able to read these too.

A favourite piece would have to be the Moon Landing Was Faked / No It Wasn't pair of articles, which I feel ably illustrated the open-mindedness of the magazine, at the same time as it applied logic and common sense to the various claims.

As a side note, I used to visit the SF book shop *Dark They Were and Golden Eyed* – brilliant name – where the Fortean Times team used to meet, but before I had heard of the magazine. For some reason, I recall one day seeing a chap standing on the stairs up to the next floor, talking to some of the staff down below, and I like to imagine this was Bob Rickard. Who knows?

Dave Miles
Basingstoke, Hampshire

I'm writing with my memories of *Fortean Times* on the occasion of it turning 50, not too far from my own 50th.

Like many of the 'Haunted Generation', I remember reading library books as a child on the mysterious world – things like crystal skulls and pyramid power – and being both fascinated and a bit frightened.

That same section of the library had the books of James Randi, which I moved onto in my know-it-all teen years. As an adult I found myself souring on the skeptical movement, as it seemed to grow

The Benefits of Forteana

A short story by Claire Conway to mark the 50th anniversary of Fortean Times.

A Plesiosaurus in Loch Ness? George smiled to himself. Some people will believe anything, he thought, but carefully placed the latest issue of *The News* back into its paper sleeve before sliding it into his briefcase ready to show to his friend Roger over lunch.

Anything to escape the dull monotony of office life, especially when the office was in the type of artificially-lit basement even dust and moths couldn't escape from. In winter, he didn't see sunlight at all. Travelling to work in the dark, spending all day shuffling papers, emerging at the end of it all to the hushed gloaming of a field in the middle of nowhere with only the relief of dewy night air and gently rustling trees reminding him he was still alive.

Goodness knows what his wife would've thought of him subscribing to this new 'Fortean' newsletter; the late Mrs Talpa had only ever consulted *Woman's Weekly* and *Old Moore's Almanac*, and firmly believed they should know their place and not dabble with fantastical nonsense.

But I *want* fantastical nonsense, George thought. I want to believe in something more. I want to see a tiny universe in an acorn cup, consider a shooting star might scatter alien seed and grow a generation of giants. I want to dig the earth of ley lines until the vibrations sing through my veins. I want to fall asleep one night and find myself on a lunar beach being greeted by the benevolent nods and smiles of my ancestors – and awake knowing it's all there, just waiting for me.

Roger was less responsive than he'd hoped, barely glancing at the cover during their lunch break. "Do they really believe all of this, then? It's 1974, not the Dark Ages," he said, winking at



a passing secretary while lighting up a woodbine.

"No. Well, maybe. That's the whole point." George rubbed his eyes, dry and gritty from the overhead fluorescent tubes. "Some things are explainable, even rational, and contain no mystery at all. But others... well, there's always a chance that we don't know everything – that the world is much, much stranger and more multifaceted, even multi-universed, than we allow ourselves to believe – that there is room for the possibility of possibilities..."

George's voice tailed off as he pawed awkwardly at his tuna sandwich. "Anyway," Roger said, apparently keen to change the subject, "Saturday tomorrow, old fella, and the Foxes are playing the Terriers. Want to come? I've got tickets."

"No. No, thank you," George replied, "I've got plans of my own."

Leaving work that evening George looked up at the skies and felt the first flakes of snow on his face. Winter's here, he thought, hugging his velvet coat a little tighter. He hummed a Nick Drake song to himself as he scurried home, agreeing with the sentiment that sometimes the Earth tilts too quickly.

Despite the cold and frozen mud, George's feet didn't stop

until he reached the door of the shed at the bottom of his garden. Reassured by the ethereal glow from beneath it, he knocked politely and waited for an invitation to enter.

"Come in, George." The voice was no louder than a whisper, yet carried itself with enough authority to silence a nearby owl and cause two field mice to turn restlessly in their burrow. George stepped inside, his whiskers quivering at the particularly sulphurous cloud emanating from

the cauldron that bubbled in the middle of the room although no fire was lit beneath it.

The owner of the voice stood crouched over the cloud, stirring it watchfully with what appeared to be a hazel stick. The sleeves of his tattered robes rolled up to reveal the desiccated scars of one marked by misadventure and antiquity.

"Any luck today then, my boy?"

"A little, sir. I left a copy of the newsletter on the notice board behind me, this evening. Someone will see it, and read it, and wonder."

The tall figure straightened up as much as he could in the confines of the wooden hut and replied with a wry smile, "You're trying, aren't you. You really believe this patch of earth is worth saving."

George nodded mutely, suddenly feeling more tired than he had ever been and longing for his warm bed and the lullaby of the distant river.

"Good little creature, but I did warn you. If not enough humans believe in the possibility of possibilities, you are doomed. All of you."

"It will work, I'm sure of it. I'll try again with the next issue. And the next."

Claire Conway
Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland

older but not to mature. While there were writers doing needed work (particularly around the Satanic Panic), most seemed happiest mocking those they saw as stupid or deluded. In 2001, I picked up an issue of *Fortean Times* in a local bookstore and found what I had been searching for without having a name for it: a sense of joy and wonder in a world that doesn't fit neatly into theories and categories, while not believing every single claim and claimant, with humour and kindness towards our fellow flawed humans: forteanism.

That first issue also had your usual issue and page citations for previous coverage of a topic and a book review that decried a lack of an index. That warmed my librarian heart and showed that your dedication to useful gathering of the strange was not just words, but backed up by detailed hard work. I have been reading ever since.

A fortean viewpoint is greatly influencing my own research on culinary history, especially the myths created by blinkered devotion to particular theories. Should I ever finish my book, I hope to send it to you – complete with index and source citations.

Sarah Hunt
Bothell, Washington, USA

I started subscribing to *FT* at the age of 18, which would have been 1985, and all issues travelled around the country with me in a steadily growing collection for several years. As a former meteorologist with a doctorate in atmospheric physics I am naturally fascinated by the phenomena and history of ufology and particularly enjoy Jenny Randles's articles.

Over the years I have steadily collected all back issues of *FT* and a good sized library of forteana, such as old *Info Journals*, and a set of William Corliss's *SourceBook Project* books. However, my most prized possession is shown in the attached photograph. It takes pride of place in my reading nook, and is a framed, mint issue of *The News* #1.

I would like to give a big thank you to the *FT* editorial team and clippers: both past, present, and future. I look forward to many more years of reading news of the weird, wacky, and wonderful.

Dr Carl Bradbury-Proudlove
London

I clearly remember the first time I saw *FT*: at the Society for Psychical Research, when it was based in Adam & Eve Mews, Kensington. It was 1987 and I had recently joined the SPR. I read the magazine in the library before becoming a subscriber with issue 51 (Winter 1988/9). Gradually, I obtained the reprint collections covering the first 50. I quickly began sending in clippings (which I still do), and from issue 69 (June/July 1993) to my pleasant surprise I was listed as a special correspondent. Later I contributed the occasional article and review. *FT* has been part of my life for a long time now.

In addition to the pleasure the magazine has given me, I have fond memories of the *UnConventions* and the *Of Monsters and Miracles* exhibition held at Croydon Clocktower in 1995. What I particularly like about *FT* is that it is never predictable, and those who read the magazine from cover to cover are exposed to the broadest range of strange phenomena. Working through it is a highlight of the month, so here's to the next 50 years.

Tom Ruffles
Impington, Cambridgeshire

My recollection of when I first subscribed to *FT* is that it was an issue number in the mid-30s, which would place it around 1981-1982. I had seen references to *FT* in other magazines, which suggested that it was the 'go-to' publication for weirdness. In those pre-Internet days it took a little tracking down, but after receiving my first copy I was hooked on "the best magazine in the world"! Armed with the first three reprint books, I am delighted to say that I have a complete set of the magazine, and I am very proud to be described as "a regular contributor to *FT*". The range of topics covered means that I get to be informed about things that I would otherwise never hear about, and so many things quoted are downright weird, thought-provoking or hysterically funny.

But I would like to take the opportunity of praising everyone associated with *FT* for keeping the show on the road through some of the more difficult times and getting such a quality product to press every



four weeks. In particular, my thanks to David Sutton for his friendship, editorial skill and patience in dealing with all my unsolicited articles, which keep piling up on his desk. It is testament to David and the magazine that there are so many contributors who want to be published in *FT*, and that from the great miscellany of articles submitted each issue has a coherent and topical theme. Long may it continue!

Rob Gandy
Spital, Wirral

I've been onboard for 45 years of *Fortean Times*' 50 and was given the honorific title of 'special correspondent' long ago – a grand title I don't really deserve, being happy to work away in the engine room, so to speak. But it has been the longest-lasting relationship of my adult life, a touchstone that brings constant new joys.

Alan Gardiner
Burgess Hill, West Sussex

Being very much a member of the 'Haunted Generation', you could say that I was primed to become a *Fortean Times* reader sooner or later, but I didn't actually discover it until the mid 1990s, when a flatmate put me on to it. This was at the height of *X-Files* mania, and at first I thought the magazine was some kind of *X-Files* fanzine as it looked to cover similar ground! Soon my flatmate would be lending me his copy once he was finished with it every month, and – long story short – that was

me hooked for the next three decades or so.

These days I see *Fortean Times* as a beacon of sanity as well as a source of education and entertainment and I would be lost without it.

Long may it reign!

Matt Stanhope
Barmby Moor, East Riding of Yorkshire

For me, it all started with my mum's 1975 Readers Digest book *Strange Stories, Amazing Facts*. [More on this next issue – Ed.] I was only five then and deemed to be too young for it. Apart from the fact that I couldn't lift the great tome off the shelf anyway, the print was too small for my ladybird eyes.

So it was some years later when I first came across Varney the Vampire, Spring-heeled Jack, Nessie, werewolves, vampires, the Faces of Belmez, Borley Rectory, Aleister Crowley and his Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and (closer to home here in Norfolk) Black Shuck, as well as many other stories about strange phenomena, all nestled in between the maroon covers of the big Readers Digest book. It was a fountain of information that my spongy mind soaked up readily. If only they taught that at school, I would have A*s all over the place. Various books on the occult and the supernatural followed.

Fast forward to the early Nineties and a recommendation from my mother to watch a programme called, according to her,

LEFT: Pride of place: Dr Carl Bradbury-Proudlove's framed copy of the first issue of *The News* from Nov 1973.

"The Truth Is Out There". "It's got weird watery music and this man and woman go and investigate strange happenings. She reins him in when he goes off on one. You'll really like it. It's just your thing."

Mothers are never wrong are they? Hooked is not the word to be used here: addicted/obsessive/couldn't wait to see the next one. In the very first episode I saw, Agent Mulder was in his basement broom cupboard when he mentioned to Agent Scully that he'd read an article that was relevant to their investigation in *Fortean Times*. (Fortean what? Okay, file that one away. It could only be a fictional paper anyway.) A few weeks later I was in WH Smith and was astounded to see nestled between *Kerrang!* and *Punch*, the aforementioned 'fictional' mag that my new hero had mentioned. It was a Holy Grail moment. If the clouds had parted and bathed me in a shaft of sunlight and a choir of angels sang, it would have seemed quite appropriate.

It was with slightly trembling hands that I paid for my first *Fortean Times*. It was mine, all mine! At last I could read the same stories that Fox Mulder was reading! I know that was a bit over the top, but it was my first thought.

The magazine contained everything my curious mind could have dreamed of. I loved the Sidelines, Strange Deaths, The Hierophant, Hunt Emerson's Gully Bull, and Jenny Randles. Some of the 'It Happened To Me' stories made my hair stand on end. The letters were always brilliant, as I realised I was not the only one who was interested in this subject. It was a lovely introduction to the world of Mr Charles Fort. If I remember, the Chupacabras had just arrived in the world, causing an uneasy stir. I felt like a kid who had just got his first full time job. With my *Fortean Times*, I had arrived.

And with the advent of *Fortean TV*, starring the Reverend Lionel Fanthorpe, I was like a dog with two tails.

When it comes to witnessing strange phenomena myself, I



LEFT: A 10th anniversary envelope from Michael Ferrier's collection of *FT* ephemera.

don't have much to record. My wife and I saw a green fireball slowly make its way across the sky in the mid-Nineties. During the second outbreak of Covid I was thinking of an old friend I hadn't seen in years; a few days later I saw him walking towards me. I recognised his walk, after 20 odd years. We stopped and had a chat. He was amazed that I recognised him as we were both wearing masks. We have kept in touch ever since.

When I was younger, I had a strong sense of precognition. I would find myself in places that I recognised, but had never been to before. I recognised that place! I was standing right there, wearing those clothes, as if it was a snapshot from the future.

Now, I am a little embarrassed to say this, but I do believe in the little people. When things go missing in the house, they often turn up a few days later in a different place. Or sometimes in the exact same spot where they *should* have been, right on top, in plain sight. And sometimes in the garden too. Obviously, they use things outside as well. We always say thank you to them out loud when items are returned. Recently I have found them to be helpful. When I have been looking for certain things and not found them immediately and then gone back to have another look 10 minutes later, lo and behold, there they are.

Having read *Fortean Times* for 30-odd years, I certainly have kept more of an open mind and it has changed the way I see the world. Every month it has always given me that sideways step away from the world that I need and always provides interesting, entertaining, engaging, incredible and wonderful subjects to read about. I will never stop being curious

about the world we live in, and *FT* nourishes my curiosity.

So, thanks to my mother for the Big Maroon Book and "The Truth Is Out There" programme. And to *Fortean Times*, a huge heart-felt "Thank You" for being part of my life.

Stay Curious. Question everything. Live long and prosper.

Gavin Flynn,
Aylsham, Norfolk

In 1979 I bought a book called *Phenomena: A Book of Wonders* by John Michell and Robert JM Rickard in a second-hand bookshop in Louth, Lincolnshire, for £2. The book contained everything I was interested in and I had to know more about this Charles Fort chap. This began my fascination with everything *fortean*: I am typing this in my room with overflowing bookshelves, books piled up on the floor and Hunt Emerson drawings hung on the walls.

I started subscribing to *FT* with #28 and as I was in the Merchant Navy at the time its irregular appearance meant that it was usually waiting for me after my four-month trip, and the Dover edition of the *Complete Books of Charles Fort* was an essential part of my luggage everywhere I went.

I read every issue from cover to cover (and still do) and bought as many back issues as I could, along with the occasional publications – *Wild Man*, *Toad in the Hole*, *Halifax Slasher*, *Puzzling Questions*, *Fortean Studies* and the various John Brown booklets.

This has presented me with an excellent opportunity to rediscover my collection of *FT* ephemera – envelopes and letters from Bob regarding the various futures of *FT*, CDs, mugs and the 21st anniversary plate.

Thanks for keeping me entertained and informed over the past 40+ years – with a bit of luck I'll get another couple of decades out of it; and there's a clause in my will that they have to continue subscribing once I'm gone.

Michael Ferrier,
East Yorkshire

Fairy lore & starstruck

Dr Francis Young, in his delightful article 'Fairy Origins' (**FT434:38-41**), acknowledges that British fairy lore must partly be seen in anthropological perspective as a near-universal phenomenon. However, he appears to treat that affinity, along with Roman and Germanic influences, as a wholly traditional or residual one, giving no heed to the fact that fairy lore was also – if not primarily – a continuously lived experience. In all ages and places, altered states of consciousness have confronted people with spiritual beings, whose reality needed to be incorporated into the worldview of the broader culture. Whatever theories culture supplied to colour their interpretation, whether indigenous, classical or Christian, these *recurrent* visions were always the principal determinants of the belief. They took all manner of forms.

One common trend across northern Europe seems to have been for fairies or their congeners to be seen in places that archaeologists identify as cemeteries of a pagan age. This was not an expression of euhemerism or 'degenerationism', as these fairies are not reducible to live prehistoric people (surviving or remembered) or their gods, but at best to the spirits of these people when they were dead. The sightings, in many cases, were above all a type of spiritual experience in the category of seeing ghosts or 'aliens', which people subsequently made sense of in traditional terms. This is true regardless of how these visions may be explained. So yes, the complex cultural history of fairy theory is indispensable, but it is ancillary to the actual encounters. It wasn't all just imaginative story-telling.

● According to **FT435:6**, the earliest report of someone being struck by a meteorite dates from 1677 in Italy. A far earlier case appears to be on record, however. The Hittite king Murshili II in his *Ten Year Annals* stated that a 'thunderbolt' wounded the rebellious king Uhha-ziti of Arzawa by hitting him in his knees or making him fall on his knees, depending on the translation. This would

have been around 1318 BC in what is now Ephesus, Turkey. One could argue about the meaning of the word *kalmishana* ('thunder-bolt'), but it is important to bear in mind that meteorites used to be widely perceived in folklore as 'thunderstones'. The 'knees' might or might not be a euphemism for the groin area. Some speculate that this space rock was the very one venerated in Ephesus as a form of the goddess Artemis at the time of Paul's visit (*Acts* 19.35). Others saw a link with the rain of stones over Canaan at the time of Joshua (*Joshua* 10.11). For more on all this, see my article in *Culture and Cosmos*, 23.1 (2019), pp. 21-69, available for free at http://www.cultureandcosmos.org/pdfs/23-1/23-1_van_der_sluijs_celestial_miracle.pdf.

Marinus van der Sluijs
Namyangju, South Korea

Growth of AI

Some thoughts re Andrew May's Forum article "AI, Art and Forteanana" [**FT433:54-55**]. AI technology such as Chatbots, Image Generators, Text-to-Video, etc, is almost certainly going to replace a whole swathe of jobs, many in white-collar or creative industries.

Coding, technical authoring, web design, press releases, product descriptions, events listings, and graphic design are some areas where AI could start to make an impact, if it is not already doing so. The cost savings from using an AI tool rather than hiring a professional would be enough to justify the adoption of AI for many businesses.

The current writers/actors strike in Hollywood shows that AI poses a real threat to the creative industries, with the replacement of scriptwriters and bit-part actors being one of the reasons for the dispute.

AI certainly has deficiencies, not the least of which is inaccurate or factually incorrect answers. However, opening access to AI tools by the public vastly increases their training sets, and exposes them to a whole range of different questions and problems.

Undoubtedly, many people just see AI as a novelty at the moment, and are just playing with these tools, or using them in a frivolous manner, like using Chatbots to

write jokes or turn reports into rap songs. However, in doing this, the public, all over the globe, is helping to train the next generation of AI tools.

My humble guess is that we are at an equivalent stage with AI as we were with consumer technology when pocket calculators were first introduced. The first products were clunky and limited, and a generation of kids grew up using them as normal tools. Then came scientific and programmable calculators, then home computers, games consoles, PCs...

AI will develop in ways we cannot predict, and will have applications we cannot imagine. Some jobs will be replaced by AI, while other opportunities will open up. There will be new threats from various nefarious uses, from the inevitable redundancies, and from politics failing to keep pace with the technology.

Ultimately, the extent of any threat from AI will be determined by how much autonomy we give it, and where that autonomy is granted.

Stan Sweeney
Shotts, Lanarkshire

Rosenheim Poltergeist

That's some top sleuthing by Matt Colborn [FT436:61], who was able to go into considerably more depth on the Rosenheim office poltergeist than either time or space or my limited access to German language material allowed in my original article.

Given the sheer number of haunts that every episode of *Strange Powers* set running, it was quite the task to give the updates I could and it was entirely in the hope that readers with specific additional knowledge would engage via the letters page.

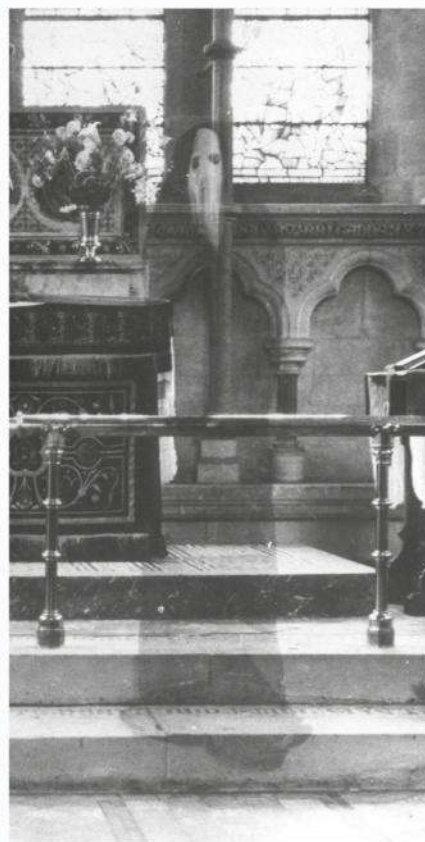
Here my central point was less whether the case itself was fraudulent, but more that one needed to look beyond the English language sources to make an accurate judgement. Matt nimbly does exactly this, and thereby provides a robust counterargument. I hope that nobody takes anything they read in *Fortean Times* as the last word on any matter.

Ryan Shirlow
By email

Newby Church Ghost

I was interested to read Roger Morgan's letter about The Reverend Lord's ghost photograph [FT435:67]. We held this photograph in the Fortean Picture Library and I corresponded at length with Revd Lord from 1973 to 2000, the year of his death. He never admitted that the photograph was faked, and like everyone else, I do not know whether it was. Revd Lord was certainly a keen photographer of the old school, often writing about his hobby in his letters, but I never had any reason to suspect him of having faked the image. He was not interested in personal publicity, and always refused invitations to appear on television programmes. Did someone else carry out a hoax, as suggested by Roger at the end of his letter? It doesn't seem feasible to me. I can't imagine that "regulars down the local pub" would feel the urge to hoax the new vicar. Why would they want to do such a thing? How would they know that he was going to visit the church with his camera at that particular time, and indeed how would they manage to carry out their hoax without him seeing anything? After all, Revd Lord said that he never saw the figure when he was in the church, so he can't have photographed a robed hoaxter, and a semi-transparent one at that. If Roger's suggested 'hatstand and coathanger' method were used, together with double exposure of the film, this surely could not have been achieved without the involvement of Revd Lord. He used one film (12 frames) inside the church, the ghost appearing only on frame 5. Anyone carrying out a hoax would surely use several frames on the ghost, varying the exposures, to make sure of success, not just one.

And what makes Roger think that Revd Lord was 'naïve'? That is surely an unfair and unprovable judgement. In 25+ years of correspond-



ence he never struck me as being in any way naïve. It would have been interesting to talk to him in person, and I almost met Revd Lord in the 1970s, but it was clearly not meant to be. The very day of the planned meeting, we were driving over the North York Moors to his home when our car broke down and the day was spent getting it repaired, followed by a necessary immediate return to London.

Although he claimed not to be psychic, Revd Lord did tell me that he had seen a ghost many years before, when he was aged around 18, so in the early 1930s. He had gone out on his bike to pick mushrooms, crossing Roelcliffe common and cycling up the long lane to Waingate farm in North Yorkshire.

As he told it: "For the sake of secrecy, always necessary after finding a good mushroom site, I took advantage of the Harvest moon and the time for my jaunt would be coming up to 9pm or perhaps later. There was a bright full moon and I was half

way along the farm lane when there appeared in the right hand field the silvery figure of a man running. The lane was flanked on each side by thorn hedges with an oak tree every now and then, and the figure ran out of the right hand field into the right hand hedge, across the lane, through the left hand hedge – and disappeared. This happened perhaps twenty feet [6m] or so in front of me. I got off the bike at once, of course. The figure made no sound at all, either breaking through both hedges or running across the poor road surface. The night was completely silent. There were no aircraft and the sky was cloudless. There was nothing to project a shadow, but, in any case, there is no such thing as a silver shadow. The shadow is the darkest part of the surroundings. This was the unmistakable figure of a man and he was running. He was silver coloured or semi opaque. I was not, for some reason I can't imagine, at all scared, and I went on to get my mushrooms. I recounted the tale to my father on my return. Unhesitatingly he put it down to an appearance by 'old Cambage' who had died a week previously. He had been tenant of Waingate farm for years until he became too old, when he came down to live in the village, and he hated it. Father had ribbed him many times about ghosts. Maybe this was the old chap's way of getting his own back. This was my first and last ghost."

Janet Bord
Wales

PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past tells the story of a popular ventriloquist who once used his talents to avert a theatrical disaster



40. LE HURST AND JIMMY

Walter Brocklehurst was born in Prescot, Merseyside, in 1867, the son of the leather currier William Tyrer Brocklehurst and his wife Ann. As a young man, he settled down in Ruthin, Denbighshire, where he became a grocer with his shop at 11 St Peter's Square (it still stands), married Emily Jones and had a son and five daughters. Walter's great interest in life was not grocery, however, but ventriloquism: with his large dummy 'Jimmy', he set up free shows for the local children, making them laugh uproariously.

In 1904, when he was 37 years old, Walter Brocklehurst decided to become a professional ventriloquist under the artist's name 'W Le Hurst'. In the summer, he gave a series of shows in Hastings, which were very well received and more than once mentioned in the local newspapers. In the autumn, he toured Ireland to considerable acclaim; the Wexford Free Press said that "The best ventriloquist we have ever seen in Wexford is Le Hurst, who is so capable in his art as not even to have the need to play to the gallery, but who is quick, keen, and original, and all the time entertaining." At one of the shows at the Theatre Royal, Wexford, there was a gas explosion and a long

flame of gas erupted from a broken pipe. But through the medium of Jimmy, Le Hurst calmly said "It's part of the programme!" to prevent a panic, and he continued the show as some workmen mended the gas pipe; his calmness and authority in a difficult situation were admired in the local newspaper.

In 1905, Le Hurst again spent the summer in Hastings, before touring Ireland and North Wales. For a while, he performed in Hastings with a group of actors and singers who called themselves the Happy Valley Pierrots. The following year, he toured for eight full months, visiting Tyneside, Hastings and South Wales. His tour ended in January 1907 with a grand performance in his home town of Ruthin, described in some detail by the *Denbighshire Free Press*: "At the Ruthin Town Hall, on Thursday last, a crowded audience greeted Prof. Le Hurst, the popular ventriloquist, illusionist and humourist, who was assisted

in his splendid entertainment by a number of local artists... 'Jimmy', the Pierrot boy is positively irresistible as a producer of laughter, indeed, it will no doubt be remembered that the cool and clever manipulation of this manikin saved a crowded audience from fearful disaster during a panic caused by fire breaking out on the stage at the Theatre Royal, Wexford." Le Hurst went on to perform his mock drama "The Village Maiden" at the Drill Hall, Denbigh. After spending several summers in Hastings, he performed at the Pier, Colwyn Bay, in the summer of 1908.

In 1914, Le Hurst was performing at Loughborough with his new comedy "The Ventriloquist of the Pillar Box". In 1916, he is stated to have permanently moved to Southport. In 1917, being too old for wartime service, he performed in Cambridge before touring Ireland. In December 1918, he was at the Electric Theatre, Dumfries, with his



LEFT: Le Hurst and Jimmy; the card at right shows them in matching Pierrot attire.

new comedy "The Postman and the Clown". In the 1920s, Le Hurst often advertised for work in the *Stage* magazine, giving his address as 44 Cemetery Road, Southport, a modest semi-detached house that is still standing today. In 1929, Le Hurst and 'Jimmy the Clown' gave a charitable performance at a Kensington tuberculosis hospital. Disaster struck in 1933 when Southport Pier, where Le Hurst had been performing, was badly damaged by fire; the elderly variety artist did not suffer any injury, but Jimmy perished in the flames. As useful as a ventriloquist without a dummy, the now 67-year-old Walter Brocklehurst retired into his gloomy little house in Cemetery Road, never to perform again.

He died on 10 June 1940 at 4a Everton Road, Southport, from cardiac asthma secondary to myocarditis. The death certificate describes him as a "retired variety artist". His unmarried daughter Freda Kathleen witnessed the certificate; she would live on until 1975, and her sister Enid Meldred, who had married a man named Mould, died as late as 1978. In 1949, a certain Mollie Le Hurst, who described herself as the daughter of the late Le Hurst, announced her return to the stage, performing in the Isle of Wight where she was well known, just like her father. Since Walter Brocklehurst had no daughter named Mollie, it may be speculated that this was in fact Enid under an assumed name, since she is known to have assisted Le Hurst during some of his performances.

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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times.

Fortean Times keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox.

FT toes no party line.

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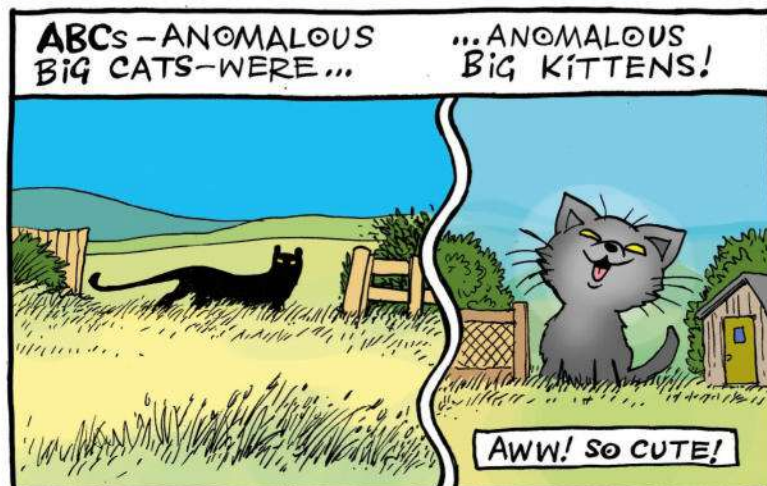
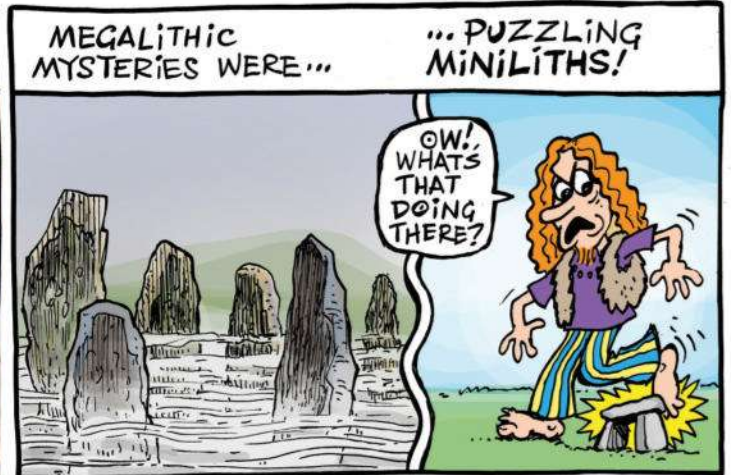
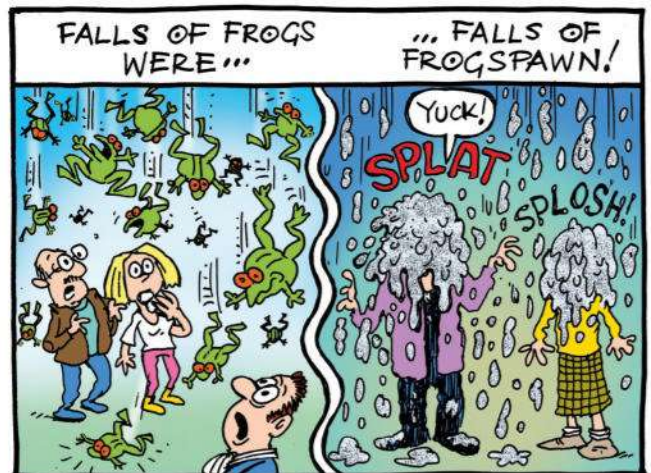
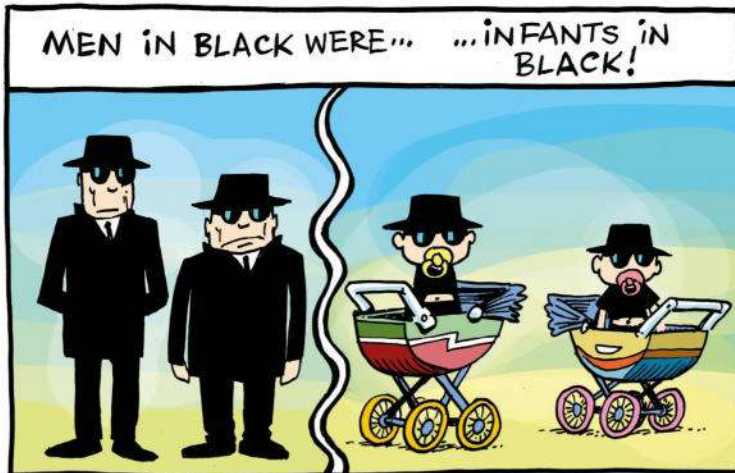
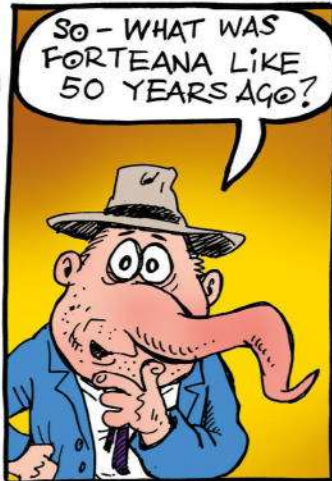
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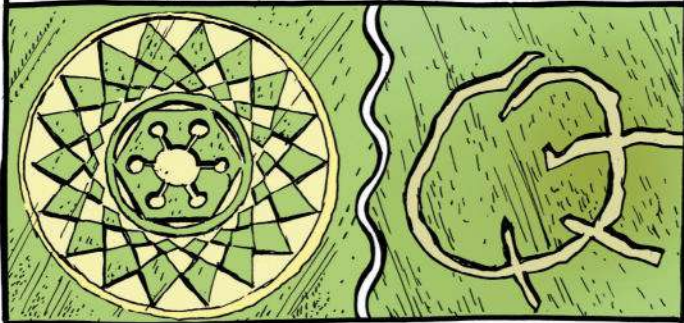
50 YEARS

HUNT EMERSON



CROP CIRCLES WERE NOT THE PRECISE, MATURE DESIGNS OF TODAY...

...BUT WERE MERE CHILDHOOD SCRIBBLES!



BIGFOOT STILL HAD BIG FEET...

...BUT THE REST OF HIM WAS TINY!



UFOs WERE UFOs, BUT WERE IN VINTAGE DESIGNS... (PRETTY COOL, ACTUALLY...)



VAMPIRES WERE ONLY TALL ENOUGH TO BITE KNEES...



50 YEARS AGO HUNT EMERSON WAS A SPOTTY YOUNG CARTOONIST ABOUT TO DISCOVER JUST HOW ODD THE WORLD CAN BE!



BUT WHAT OF YOU, GULLY BULL? WAS YOUR NOSE FOR MYSTERY FAMOUS 50 YEARS AGO?

NO... MY FAMOUS NFM WAS JUST STARTING TO SNIFF OUT ITS EARLIEST SNUFFLINGS IN THE FORTEN UNIVERSE...

I USED TO WEAR A FUNNY LITTLE BOWLER HAT BACK THEN...



AND NOW, 50 YEARS LATER, IT'S STILL NO NEARER EXPLAINING WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON...



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STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

In late July, Gail and Don Patterson went for lunch at their daughter-in-law's house in Leongatha, south-east of Melbourne, along with Heather Wilkinson, Gail's sister, and her husband Ian. Shortly after the meal, all four guests fell ill with severe stomach pain, bad enough to require a visit to the local hospital. There, medics immediately realised all four were suffering from something worse than food poisoning, transferring them to a Melbourne hospital where they were treated for death cap mushroom ingestion. Death caps are highly toxic when eaten; Heather, 66, Gail, 70, and Don, 70, could not be saved. Ian, 68, was left in a critical condition in hospital, awaiting a liver transplant. Their host, Erin Patterson, 48, was initially reported as being "fine", but later said that she was also briefly hospitalised, put on a saline drip and given a "liver protective drug".

Erin was separated from the Pattersons' son, Simon, but their split was described as "amicable". Although she refused to tell reporters what was in the meal she had cooked the victims, she told police it was beef wellington, including a mixture of button mushrooms from a major supermarket chain, and dried mushrooms bought from an Asian grocery store in Melbourne months before. Patterson said she had later served her children leftovers but had scraped the mushrooms off as they didn't like them, so they were unaffected. Police seized several objects for forensic testing including a dehydrator, found at a nearby rubbish dump. Patterson initially said that she had thrown it out "a long time ago", but later admitted that when she was in hospital with her children and ex-husband they were "discussing the food dehydrator" and he asked: "Is that what you used to poison them?" She panicked and dumped it when she was released.

The media became further exercised by the case when a decorator came forward with photos of what he described as a "death wall" at Patterson's former home covered in text in marker pen saying things like "You don't [have] long to live", "grandma RIP", "Hannah RIP" and "Me RIP". "I've looked at it and gone, holy s***, what the hell's going on here," the decorator said. Patterson, though, says she "can't fathom what has happened," insists

she "didn't do anything; I loved them," and resents "being painted as an evil witch". Investigators have not ruled out "nefarious activity" and said that "at this point in time, the deaths are unexplained". *BBC News, 8 Aug; editions.cnn.com, 9 Aug; thesun.co.uk, 16 Aug 2023.*

Delvys Garcia, 37, Denise Martinez, 26, and Noel Vigil-Benitez, 45, from Florida, had set out to hunt hogs with a friend at night near Elgin, Texas, when one of their dogs ran off and fell into a pit in the middle of a cornfield. Garcia climbed into the 4ft (1.2m) square hole to rescue the dog and when he did not reappear, first one then the other of his companions climbed in to see what had happened. When neither Garcia, Martinez nor Vigil-Benitez emerged from the pit, their companion realised something was amiss and called police. They found that the hole led to a forgotten underground cistern containing water and hydrogen sulphide gas, which, at high concentrations, overpowers the olfactory system so cannot be smelt, but will suffocate people. It is believed that the trio entered the pit one by one, were overcome by the poisonous gas, lost consciousness, then drowned in the water. It required specialist equipment to recover the bodies as the gas had to be cleared and the stagnant water pumped out, before a deputy could venture in to retrieve the victims. *fox7austin.com, 10 Aug 2023.*

After his father died, James Hendricks, 66, set off on a mission through the US West to spread his ashes, posting updates to Facebook about his travels with the title "A Final Journey with My Father". After visits to the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon and Mesa Verde national parks, he posted that he was going to Arches National Park "at the crack of dawn" to avoid traffic and get the best photos. When Hendricks didn't return from his hike, friends reported him overdue, and park rangers found his vehicle at the Sand Dune Arch Trail and shortly afterwards discovered his body "off-trail nearby". His water bottle was empty and his sister Ruth Hendricks Brough said it was thought that he may have wandered off trail after becoming disoriented by the heat, dehydration and high altitude after scattering a portion of their father's ashes. *BBC News, 8 Aug 2023.*







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ForteanTimes



PRESENTS

GHOSTS AND HAUNTINGS

SPECTRES, SPOOKS AND RESTLESS SPIRITS

From the archives of FORTEAN TIMES, the world's foremost journal of strange phenomena, comes a new collection exploring the world of ghosts, poltergeists and haunted houses.

The perfect gift for would-be ghost hunters, this special edition from *Fortean Times* investigates classic cases past and present – from haunted hotels, theatres, pubs and even record shops to spooky encounters with phantom hitchhikers and a doughnut-eating poltergeist!

Join us on a terrifying trawl through cases old and new as we investigate “the most haunted house in England”, examine the real-life ghost story that inspired *The Turn of the Screw* and explore such bizarre topics as Victorian ghost impersonators and Norwegian harbinger spirits.

Plus, our resident ghost expert Alan Murdie provides updates and commentary on the articles to help readers separate spectral fact from spooky fiction and offers his own tips for successful ghost hunting.



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